

PLAYBOY

A close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair and eyes, wearing a voluminous white feathered costume. She is holding a white straw with a bunny ear-shaped top in her mouth. The background is dark and out of focus.

**A STATE-OF-THE-ART
L.A. SEX PARTY**

**BACHELORETTES
ON THE PROWL**

**A DISPATCH
FROM A
SECRET TECH
BILLIONAIRE
RETREAT**

**25 THINGS YOU
ABSOLUTELY
MUST DO IN 2025
—OR BEFORE
THE WORLD ENDS
(WHICHEVER
COMES FIRST)**

**WE'RE
BACK**

**WITH
LORI
HARVEY**

NIKKI GLASER

ERIC CHURCH

JB SMOOVE

MATTY MATHESON

AND THE

**2025 PLAYMATE
OF THE YEAR**

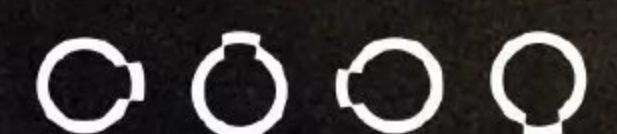


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Colossal Biosciences is rewriting the future of conservation through pioneering genetic engineering. Founded by Ben Lamm and Dr. George Church, they are resurrecting extinct species like the woolly mammoth, in aims to rewild ecosystems and inspire a vision for a more sustainable future. Follow the journey at colossal.com

MAKING EXTINCTION A THING OF THE PAST





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PHOTOGRAPH BY MEGAN BATSON COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG SWALES

PLAYBOY

1



SEX IS
PURE

Official Dating App of
 **PLAYBOY**



 APP STORE
 GOOGLE PLAY



CONTRIBUTORS



SHALOM AUSLANDER

SHALOM AUSLANDER is a novelist, memoirist, actor, and essayist whose books include *Fey*, *Mother for Dinner*, and *Foreskin's Lament*. His story "I Read the News Today, Oy Vey," about a cross-country journey in search of the true nature of antisemitism, appears on page 98.



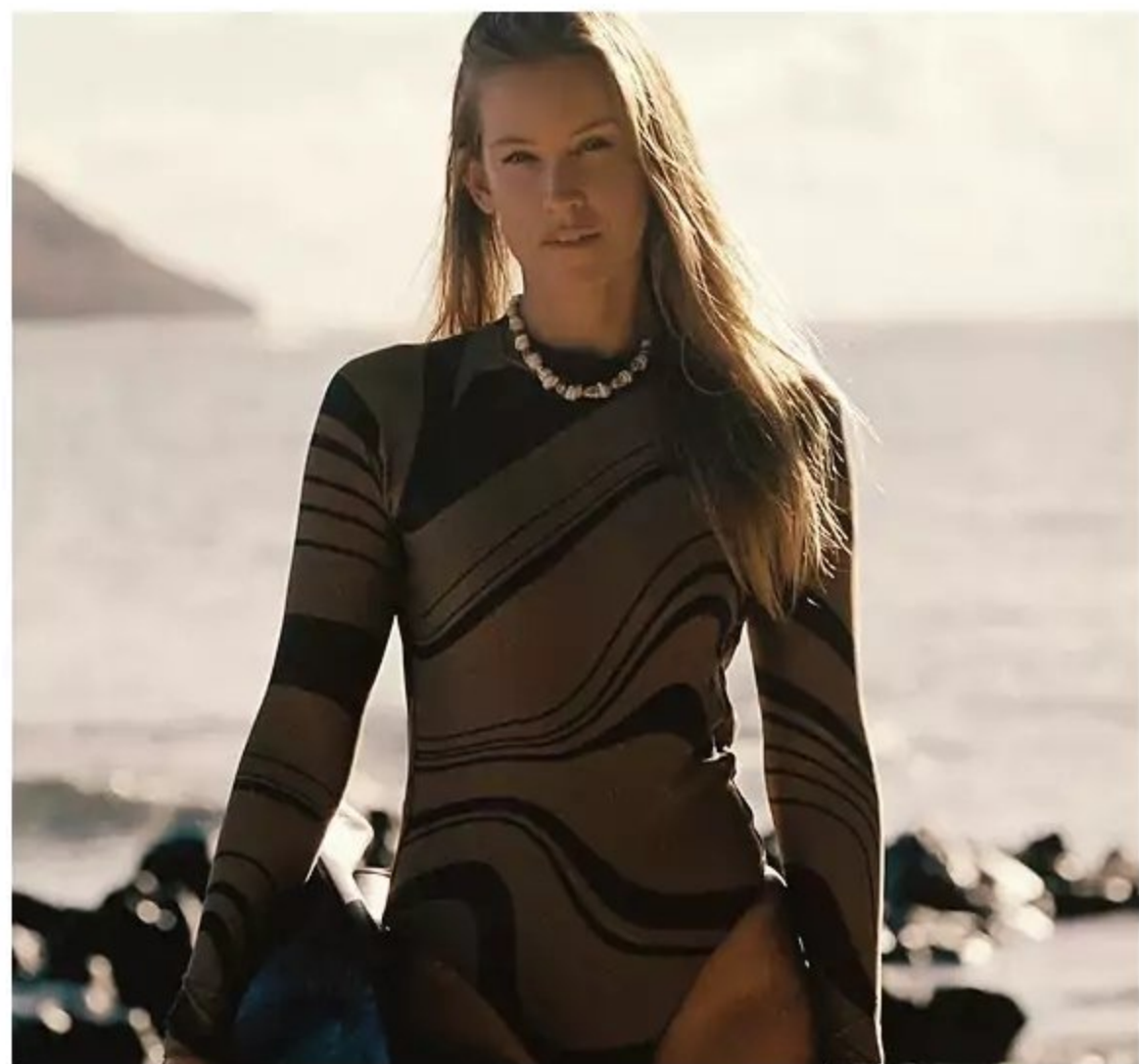
DANIEL PINCHBECK

DANIEL PINCHBECK is the *New York Times*-bestselling author of *Breaking Open the Head*, *Quetzalcoatl Returns*, *How Soon Is Now*, and other books. He writes the newsletter *Liminal News* and hosts online courses at the Liminal Institute. He is also research director for The Elevator, a think tank and incubator. On page 106, he writes about the cultural conference Hereticon.



LAUREN LARSON

LAUREN LARSON is a senior writer at *Texas Monthly* whose profiles, feature stories, and essays have appeared in *Airmail*, *Men's Health*, and the *New York Times*. Prior to joining *Texas Monthly* as a features editor in 2020, she was an editor at *GQ*. Her *Playboy* Interview with Nikki Glaser begins on page 74.



MEGAN BATSON

MEGAN BATSON is a photographer based in Oahu, and has dedicated her life to capturing the strength, beauty, and individuality of women. Living in a place like Hawaii, she finds inspiration in the natural world, especially the ocean. "Shell Games," her pictorial of Yara Khmidan and Carmen Smart, begins on page 114.



MAGDALENE TAYLOR

MAGDALENE TAYLOR is a writer and critic covering sex and culture. She lives in New York City and publishes the bestselling newsletter *Many Such Cases*. On page 56, she writes about the rise of the beta male.



ROB TANNENBAUM

ROB TANNENBAUM has been the music editor at *Blender* and a columnist at *GQ*, and has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *Details*, *New York* magazine, and the *Washington Post*. On page 46, he interviews Eric Church.



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EDITOR'S LETTER



Mike Guy Editor-in-Chief
Smiley Stevens Creative Director

Will Dana Executive Editor
Ken DeLago Art Director
Alex Hoyt Senior Editor
Allison Miller Copy Chief
Annabel Chapparat Associate Art Director
Yasmin Coutinho Photo Producer
Summer Altice Talent Coordinator
Christie Hartmann Director, Playboy Archives
Fiona Maynard Director, Rights and Permissions

Playboy Enterprises International, Inc.

Ben Kohn Chief Executive Officer
Chris Riley General Counsel
Marc Crossman Chief Financial Officer
Sharon Meymarian Deputy General Counsel
Lisa Mandel Senior Manager, Rights & Permissions
Michelle Archer Senior Vice President, People Operations

PHOTOGRAPH BY **MEGAN BATSON**

WHEN *PLAYBOY* LAUNCHED IN

1953, there was a frustration with taboos around sex and culture. So they bought a set of photos that Tom Kelley had taken of a young, blonde Hollywood upstart named Norma Jeane Baker, and splashed her on the cover of the first issue with the line “The Famous Marilyn Monroe Nude.”

Monroe’s career had already taken off, but the nudes caused a scandal that would build even more mystique around her. At the same time, the magazine began morphing into a cultural powerhouse that soon gave us Joyce Carol Oates, Alex Haley, Kurt Vonnegut, Ursula Le Guin, Ray Bradbury, Ian Fleming, and hundreds more.

Five years have passed since an issue of *Playboy* rolled off a printing press, and they have been strange years indeed. We’ve passed through the wreckage of a pandemic, sat on a violent political see-saw, and watched as discourse shrinks to tiny digital moments that explode into divisive rage at precisely the time we need reason. Just as *Playboy* was frustrated with the conservative norms of the ’50s, we want to challenge them now, too. This can mean just slowing down, listening; it can mean choosing connection and pleasure over sensation and isolation. It means rejecting poisonous, meme-driven narratives, as writer Magdalene Taylor urges in “The Rise of the Beta Male” (page 56), her disturbing report from the front lines of our emerging dystopia about young men who have given up on sex.

I want to thank everyone who’s helped bring *Playboy*’s original vision back to life. There’s cover star Lori Harvey, the force-of-nature model, actress, and entrepreneur, and author and actor Shalom Auslander, who put his life on the line and dived deep into the true meaning of antisemitism. Not to mention comedian Nikki Glaser, country megastar Eric Church, JB Smoove, chef Matty Matheson, and even the voice of President Donald Trump, speaking to *Playboy* from 35 years ago.

The internet—OnlyFans, TikTok, and the rest—has stolen sexuality and fed it into the meat grinder of the attention economy. We’re doing our part to steal it back. As the poet Wallace Stevens wrote, “The greatest poverty is not to live in the physical world.” —**MIKE GUY, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Mike

PLAYBOY



lori

LORI HARVEY has gone from the catwalk to the C-suite—but **AMERICA'S HOTTEST NEPO BABY STILL MAKES TIME** to walk her pet bunnies.

yro

lori

LORI HARVEY STRIDES across the Pasadena, California, pool grotto with an air of regal composure. Draped in a minimalist tailored sweatsuit, she commands attention with understatement—as if a gentle beam of sunlight was following her through the live oak shade.

“Fashion, for me, is a form of self-expression,” she says with a smile, as she goes through the outfits for today’s cover shoot.

“It’s about creating a narrative without saying a word.”

AT 27, Harvey has solidified her place as a core figure in the fashion and beauty industries. As the founder of SKN by LH, she approaches her business authentically. “I’ve always believed that beauty starts with self-care,” she says. “I wanted to create something that felt personal but also worked for everyone.

Skin health is universal.” **THE DAUGHTER** of *Family Feud* host Steve Harvey, Lori could have coasted on her looks and family name. But she’s a striver. She was a 24/7 model when she was barely a teenager. “My parents always encouraged me to build my own legacy,” she says. “Nothing was ever given to me.” The work ethic, and the name, opened doors to partnerships with major fashion houses like Michael Kors and Dolce & Gabbana. They also earned her a pass on the red carpet, where she accompanied love interests like Michael B. Jordan and Damson Idris. **BUT HER LIFE** isn’t an open book. In a world obsessed with oversharing, Harvey guards her privacy. “Protecting your peace is crucial,” she says. “Not everything needs to be public.”

WHEN ASKED about the pressure of being a nepo baby and modern-day “it” girl, Harvey laughs softly. “It’s not pressure if you love what you’re doing,” she says. “I’m just out here living my best life and hoping to inspire others to do the same.” —MIKE GUY







"PROTECTING your **PEACE** is crucial," Harvey says. **"NOT EVERYTHING** needs to be **PUBLIC.**"









"I've always **BELIEVED** that **BEAUTY** starts with **SELF-CARE**."





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THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE END OF THE WORLD

A HEDONISTIC, SHORT-SIGHTED, AND RECKLESSLY INDULGENT
GUIDE TO THE GOOD LIFE... **HOWEVER LONG IT LASTS.**



NO. 01 GO ON A SURF SAFARI IN...TEXAS

FROM ABOVE:
WACO SURF
DIRECTOR
BRIAN
FILLMORE
RIDES A BAR-
REL WAVE;
FRIENDS
HANG BY THE
LAGOON AT
WACO SURF; A
VISITOR TO THE
LAGOON GOES
AERIAL.



Hawaii will always be the capital of surfing, but for those seeking a more controlled environment, there's an unlikely new destination: Texas has quietly become the Maui of man-made waves. With three wave parks currently open, a fourth slated for its debut later this year, and three more in the works, the state is becoming a worthy destination for diehard rippers and newbie groms alike.

Spanning the state from Dallas to Waco to Houston, the seven parks run the technological gamut, including the novice-friendly standing wave at Dallas's Goodsurf and the latest from Kelly Slater Wave Co. (which galvanized the industry when it opened Surf Ranch in California's Central Valley almost a decade ago). The company's newest wave, created by a massive sliding hydrofoil, will be at the yet-to-be-completed Austin Surf Club, a luxury housing community. Only a few miles away, development company Surf Lakes has proposed an entire village—with restaurants, hotels, retail stores, and housing—centered on a 12-acre lagoon, though an actual surfable wave could be years off. More immediate thrills are to be found in Houston, where ATX Surf is set to open in 2025 with a 3.5-acre pool and waves that peel for more than 200 yards.

The most impressive park so far is Waco Surf, halfway between Dallas and Austin. Operated by American Wave Machines, its waves are created through a series of pneumatic-powered caissons that push air into the water. The resulting system can create its own branded waves of various shapes and sizes, like the Peak, the Coaster, and the Ramp. Surfing ranges from 30-minute beginner tutorials (\$139) to 90-minute pro sessions (\$349). In these freshwater wave pools, you can catch a wave every few minutes and get more practice than you would all summer in the ocean. —**RYAN KROGH**



No. 02 RELAUNCH A PRINT MAGAZINE FOR MEN

WHY? Why climb Mount Everest? Because it is there, good sir. And, also: There are men in the world, and most of them need people like JB Smoove and Shalom Auslander and Nikki Glaser to guide them on their way to proper style, correct behavior, and meaningful cultural context. Left to their own devices (quite literally, the devices they almost always hold in their hands and stare at), men have a tendency to let themselves go just a little—the untidy kitchens and fast food wrappers, the poorly maintained relationships, the inglorious swan dive into that mucky world of OnlyFans. — **MIKE GUY**

No. 03 BUILD SOMETHING WITH YOUR HANDS

Humans have been using wood to build furniture and shelter for tens of thousands of years. You're probably sitting in a building held up with wood right now. The craft didn't change much until the advent of power tools in the early 20th century. In recent years there's been a revival of the older tradition of hand tool woodworking: no electricity, just sharp blades, your muscle, and your evolving skill.

Look at a chair or a table built in the traditional way, and you'll seldom see nails or screws holding it together. The wooden parts fit together like a three-dimensional puzzle. Strength to strength. Every detail for a reason. Glue holds the joints in place, but the strength is in the joinery itself.

You can start with not much more than a half dozen tools, some limited instruction, and patience—a saw, a mallet, a couple of chisels, a bench plane, a combination square, and a vise will allow you to do an amazing number of things. Look up master teachers like Paul Sellers and Christopher Schwarz on YouTube.

Why would you do this? For starters, friends will marvel at the beautiful things you made with your hands. You'll also get in tune with yourself. Power tools have their place. But using them on wood is like dynamiting a tunnel through a mountain instead of hiking up and over its peak. A hand tool woodworker knows where wood is strong and weak and uses that knowledge—jujitsu-like—to coax it into breaking just how and where he wants. There's nothing virtual about it: Wood is real. And unless you toss your creation out a window or light it on fire, what you build can easily outlive you.

Hand work requires you to slow down. Way down. Sometimes, when I'm working on a piece, I'll feel the urge to speed up. Then I remember. Why? I'm here for this experience, the suppleness of the materials and the mastery of skills growing in my hands over time. It's an antidote for our sped-up, disposable world. And you'll never lose a limb or a finger to a chisel or a handsaw. — **JOSH MARSHALL**

BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE EDITORS DIVED INTO PLAYBOY'S ARCHIVE TO REIMAGINE THE MAGAZINE FOR A NEW ERA.



No. 04

GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Mike Brodie spent his 20s chasing a life outside the mainstream, living with a punk rock band in Philadelphia and crisscrossing America by freight train—whatever could take him far away from the rural Florida life he'd outgrown. Along the way someone gave him a camera, and he began taking pictures of long-haul trains and the transient characters who rode them. Later collected in the monograph *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity*, those intimate images brought comparisons to the work of Stephen Shore and Robert Frank and earned him a moniker, “the Polaroid Kid.” Now a diesel mechanic, Brodie, 39, released a new book of photographs, *Failing*, last fall. Here he shares his thoughts on how to make a meaningful life in a time and a place that’s being drained of that precious commodity.

I’d tell younger men to find purpose and meaning in their life, earlier on, and by any means necessary—whether that be a discipline like a trade skill or work, or an existential journey found in long periods of traveling alone. You don’t have to go very far. Have fun, but don’t fall for the cheap thrills found in drinking and drugging and partying. Don’t fall for the social pressures and just doing what everybody else is doing—you’ll end up with heartache and regret, spinning your wheels chasing a lot of empty and unrequited love. Pursue loving, meaningful relationships. Go on adventures and take calculated risks. Remember, everything that we do in our teens and 20s might be what projects us into adulthood. Ask yourself, will the choices you make now be rewarding? Not a reward in the physical sense, but the visceral feeling of looking back on your life, at what you accomplished, and telling yourself, “I’m so glad I did that, but even more, I’m glad that it’s over.”

—AS TOLD TO MARK HEALY



WHEN THE TAILGATE OF MIKE BRODIE’S TRUCK FELL OFF IN THE NEVADA DESERT, HE FIRST TURNED IT INTO A FIREPIT AND THEN INTO THE SUBJECT OF A PHOTOGRAPH, *BURNING TAILGATE* (2018), WHICH APPEARS IN HIS NEW BOOK, *FAILING*.

No. 05

BECOME THE KING OF DRAFTKINGS

NOW THAT mobile sports gambling is legal in 38 states and logging in to FanDuel is the only way much of the male population can feel alive, sports discourse has never been smarter or more opaque. Although this world of spreads and money lines can be daunting, it’s one you need to master: Gambling jargon is the new lingua franca, and understanding how to read the lines is akin to understanding sports.

In the United States, odds are shown in relation to a hypothetical \$100 wager—favorites are represented with “minus odds” (what you’d need to bet to win \$100) while underdogs are listed at “plus odds” (what you’d

win from a \$100 bet). When you bet on the outcome of the game, you're betting on the "money line." In last year's Super Bowl, the San Francisco 49ers were favored at -124 (a \$124 bet would net \$100, plus your original money back), with the Kansas City Chiefs at +104 (\$100 would win \$104, plus your original bet).

In addition to the money line, the most common way to bet is on the "spread," which functions like a golf handicap. When you bet on the spread, the margin of victory matters more than the result. Against the Chiefs, the Niners were -1.5-point favorites. To "cover" the spread, they'd have needed to win by at least two points—a one-point Niners win would have functionally been the same as a 20-point Niners loss. Since the spread already accounts for the comparative ability of the two teams (college football games can have spreads as high as 40 points or more), the odds are usually around -110 on either side.

Beyond these basics, you can get deeper into totals (the combined number of points/goals/runs in a game), player props (one player's stats), futures (season-long outcomes), parlays (combining several picks into one multi-leg bet with a bigger payout), and same-game parlays (you will never win one of these, don't even bother). Since props and totals are less popular, they offer more opportunity for sharp gamblers to carve out an advantage before oddsmakers can adjust.

To be sure, if you bet on sports, you'll almost certainly lose money over the long run. Instead, think of gambling as a way to enhance your overall experience as a fan. A scan for games with close spreads and high totals each morning can tell you what's worth watching; the MVP and championship odds are a snapshot of which players and teams really matter. Thinking like a bookie is an antidote to the inherent myopia of fandom. Follow the lines and you'll see the whole field.

—JACK TIEN-DANA



THE RICHARD MILLE RM 65-01 AUTOMATIC WINDING SPLIT-SECONDS CHRONOGRAPH MCLAREN W1



No. 06

START A KILLER WATCH COLLECTION

Collecting fine watches is like seeking out luxury cars and wine: It offers aficionados endless fascination and, if you do it right, some flippable speculative revenue. But with watches, you won't need infinite garage space or a temperature-controlled storage chamber.

Skip the snooty Elite Watch Club with its "instant-in" models. And forget the usual suspects. (Rolex and Patek Philippe, we're looking at you.) Why play it safe? Go with a Richard Mille. Founded in 2001, this Swiss house isn't just another dusty legacy. At age 50, Mille, a veteran watch executive, created a brand that exudes passion and swagger. Many Richard Mille timepieces are linked to motorsports: The brand sponsors a Le Mans team, and its tagline is "A racing machine on the wrist." But Mille also relies on sophisticated and traditional watchmaking technique that balances beauty with horological substance.

The new RM 65-01 Automatic Winding Split-seconds Chronograph McLaren W1, which made its debut this fall, is a 500-piece limited edition created in partnership with automaker McLaren to honor the groundbreaking \$2.1 million W1 hypercar. For the collector, it's highly desirable for a couple of reasons: It's a super-rare and super-deluxe collaboration.

Using a Mille-signature tonneau case shape, crafted in "Carbon TPT" and titanium, the watch keeps the McLaren references tastefully restrained, like the orange flashes on the optional rubber strap. The real driving force is Richard Mille's most advanced movement to date: the RMAC4, which is mounted, like an engine, on shock-absorbing rubber components. The movement encompasses a special "split seconds" (or rattrapante) chronograph function that lets you stop the initial chronograph hand with a single push and activate an additional second hand that continues the "stopwatch" down to one-tenth of a second. That kind of precision is a thing of beauty. \$388,000, richardmille.com —MIKE ESPINDLE



NO. 07 TEST YOUR LIMITS

As the Byrds taught us, there's a time to laugh and a time to weep. I'd argue there's also a time to do things that are totally irrational and so far outside the bounds of your normal life that they rearrange your sense of self. For me, this meant driving a deadly mountain pass in South Africa, a rocky dirt road that winds up and over the Drakensberg Mountains and into the tiny nation of Lesotho. Known as the Sani Pass, it's a rite of passage for young South Africans (and, I later learned, the inspiration for the Nissan Sani). Appropriately enough, I made the drive with friends in an old stick-shift Nissan 4x4. We were just out of college—a summer idyll before real life set in. I'm not sure why we rented a manual; I was the only one who could drive stick, and I'm not even a particularly skillful driver. In any event, I'd been at the wheel for hours by the time we approached the mountains, a late-afternoon light falling across the ridges. J.R.R. Tolkien was born in South Africa, and I remember thinking it looked like Middle Earth.

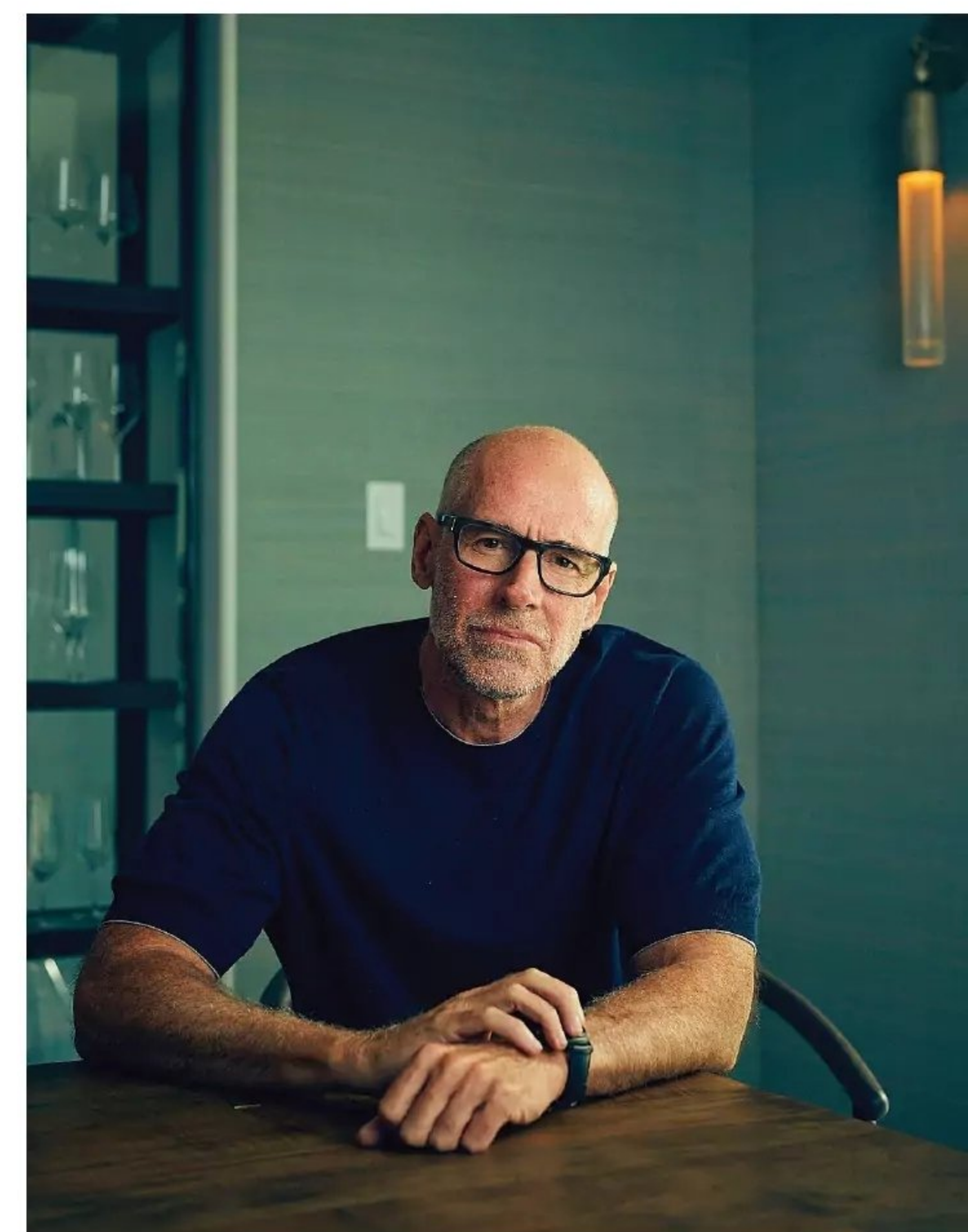
The road was narrow, the dropoff

harrowing, the guardrail nonexistent. It was summer, which is South Africa's winter, and as we climbed higher we began to see patches of ice. At one switchback, we stopped for a picture of the dusk-lit valley below us. When I tried to restart the truck, it rolled backward before I could give it gas. Fear flooded my body; I thought of us sliding off the road and down the rocky escarpment. After I parked the car, my friend Chris had a plan: He put two large rocks behind the rear tires, took the driver's seat, punched us forward, and somehow lurched his way up the mountain. At the top, border patrol agents inspected our passports and waved us through. What we didn't realize was that we'd have to descend the other side of the mountain in the dark and drive 50 miles before we came to a town.

Over the next few weeks, we put 3,000 miles on that Nissan. I put some serious miles, too, on the odometer of my mind. And every now and then, when I find myself at a frightful juncture, I think of the Sani Pass. Sometimes you have to forget your fears and just step on the gas. — **ALEX HOYT**

NO. 08 LISTEN TO SCOTT GALLOWAY, JUST NOT ALL THE TIME

THE NEW YORK University professor, podcaster, author, and advocate for young American men—emphasis on men—talks a lot. But unlike most people who talk as much as he does, Scott Galloway often says relevant things. Some of the recent provocations in his weekly newsletter, *No Mercy/No Malice*, include now standard neoliberal tropes decrying how crypto is making us lonelier; diversity, equity, and inclusion is making us more polarized; and remote work is limiting entire generations' prospects, professionally and romantically. But he also offers plenty of counterintuitive advice: about the importance of hangovers, say, and why it's best to be second to a big idea. If you're a regular subscriber, as I've become, you might find yourself thinking more critically about everything from the day's news to your own career path. Just don't go around repeating all the smart things he says over your next drinks with friends. You'll talk too much. —**A.H.**



No. 09

RESPECT THE LANCIA

QUICK. Name an Italian sports car brand that's more than 100 years old, absolutely legendary, and completely unknown to most people today.

We speak of Lancia (pronounced *Lan-cha*), and don't blame yourself if it doesn't ring a bell. Today it's a barely breathing ward of Stellantis, and its glory days are but a pair of fog lights receding in a rearview mirror. But to a select group of admirers who still drive these things—and full disclosure: I'm one of them—Lancias are among the greatest cars ever.

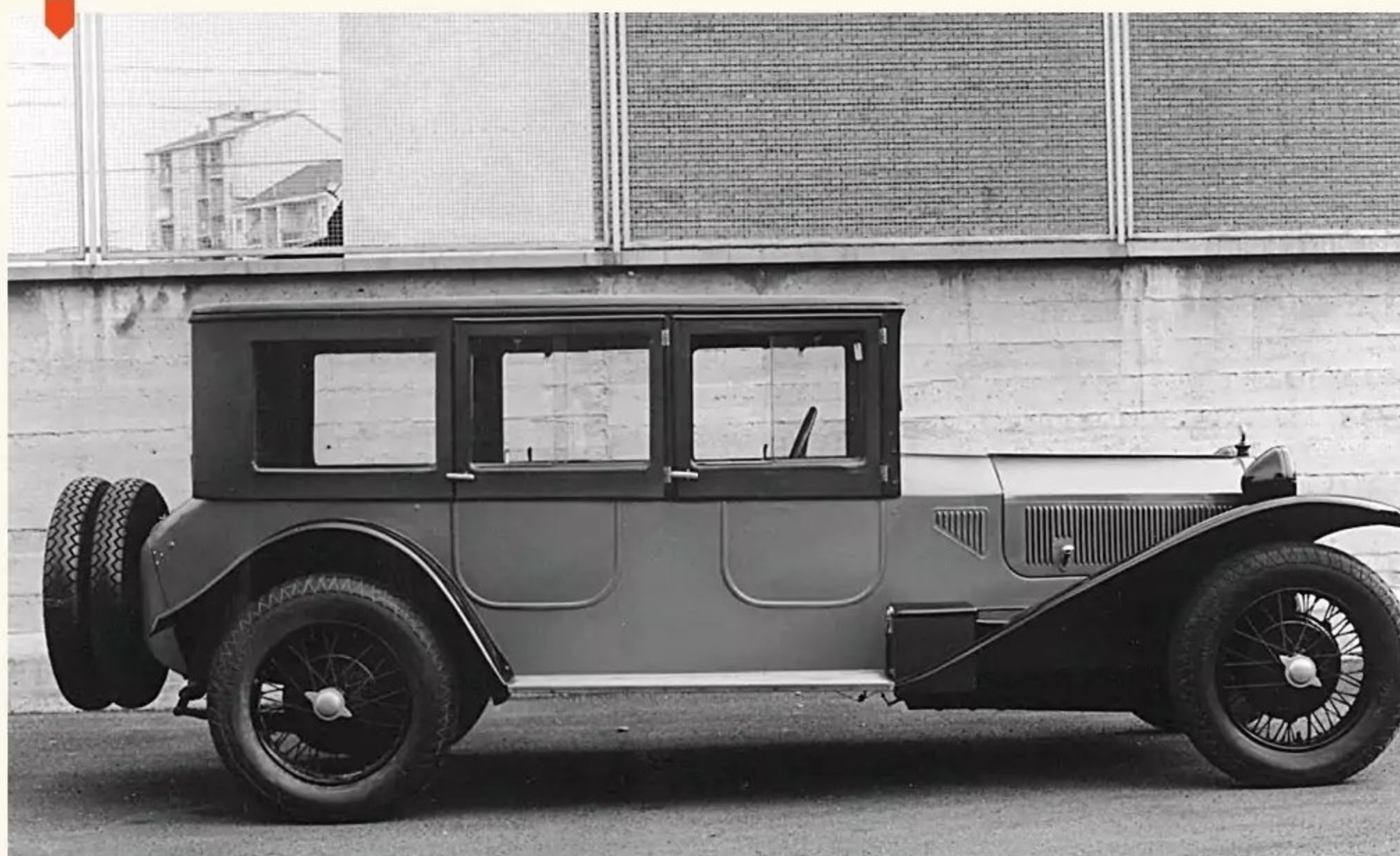
Founded in 1906 in Italy's original automotive capital, Turin, by two friends who worked at Fiat in its early days, the company revolutionized car engineering and design with a parade of innovations.

The Lambda, from 1922, laid the groundwork for a century of Lancia performance creativity that culminated with 1979's Delta Integrale, the ne plus ultra of hot European hatchbacks (and the inspiration for Rivian's forthcoming R3). Lancia has always punched above its weight, even when it was hampered by bankruptcies and shifting ownership—including a government-ordered 1969 sale to Fiat.

Of course, there's always hope the troubled parent will show Lancia some love and let Lancia be Lancia, but the road back is epically long in a way that all but screams "Don't get your hopes up." Until then, let's remember that name—Lancia—and the sad yet ennobling tale of a company that went broke not because the cars they built were too shitty, but because they were too good.

—JAMIE LINCOLN KITMAN

A. LAMBDA
1922-1931



B. AURELIA
1950-1958



**D. DELTA
INTEGRALE**
1988-1993



C. FULVIA
1963-1976



A. LAMBDA

The Lambda of 1922 was the first production car with unit-body construction and a revolutionary V4 engine—featuring a first-ever aluminum engine block and an overhead camshaft, no less. This car was bursting with engineering sophistication: independent front suspension, four-wheel brakes, central gear change, a transmission tunnel, and a trunk incorporated inside its handsome, low-slung body. All this during the Harding administration, no less.

B. AURELIA

Dozens of superb Lancias would roll out in the 1950s and '60s, but a short list of greats must include the postwar Aurelia, a Pininfarina-designed wonder that showcased two future staples of superior carmaking—the world's first V6 engine, with a rear-mounted gearbox (adopted in the Porsche 928 and all manner of Ferraris and Corvettes to come). As a mechanic friend who's worked on both for 40 years never tires of reminding me, Lancias of the '50s and '60s surpass the era's gorgeous Ferraris in all ways but looks and number of cylinders. (Hemingway ripped around Spain in his Aurelia in the summer of '53.) Cloaked in arresting streamlined coupe or convertible body styles, they comfortably trade for six-figure sums today.

C. FULVIA

A V4-powered gem boasting the day's best front-drive chassis—in coupe or sedan form—the Fulvia broke cover in 1963. It went on to dominate the Italian Rally Championship, won by the coupe all but one year from 1965 to 1973, and snagged the 1972 International Championship for Manufacturers. For decades, legendary race car drivers who could operate any road car—including Nuvolari, Taruffi, Hawthorn, Collins, and Fangio, to name a few—mostly chose Lancia Fulvias as their private transport.

D. DELTA INTEGRALE

The Rally 037 (pictured) evolved into the lethally fast all-wheel-drive Delta S4 of the middle 1980s and then the Delta Integrale, an adrenalized, turbocharged, all-wheel-drive version of the Delta hatchback—you may have seen Tyler, the Creator blasting around in it on TikTok.



MOMENT UNRELEASEDGETTY



No. 10

SKI LIKE IT'S THE LAST WINTER ON EARTH

THE CLIMATE CRISIS is no fun for skiers. In the United States alone, the average season over the past half century is down by five to seven days. So whether it's a solo expedition, a guided backcountry blast with the boys, or a family trip to a full-fledged resort, now's the time to book the ultimate powder trip.

► **UNITED STATES:** If you love steeps but hate crowds, try a national park. Beartooth Powder Guides in Cooke City, Montana, takes skiers of all levels into Yellowstone and the surrounding ranges. At night, you and your buddies can hoist some celebratory drinks before crashing in your yurt.

► **CANADA:** A similar experience, but with plusher accommodations, is Canada's Baldface, a former site for the Natural Selection Tour.

By day, it's snowcat touring and powder laps in southern British Columbia's Valhalla Range. By night, think massage and sauna.

► **FRANCE:** Zermatt and St. Moritz are obvious luxe picks in the Alps, but with global warming hammering Switzerland's resorts, take the family instead to Courchevel in the French Alps for massive terrain, reliable snow, and fantastic cuisine.

► **JAPAN:** If you don't want to be surrounded by a thousand Australians crashing Niseko for spring break, check out Stealth Backcountry. You'll relax in its 60-year-old Japanese farmhouse (nicknamed "the powder dojo") between backcountry tours around Hokkaido, not to mention all the *onsen* (hot springs) and sushi you can take. — **ROSECRANS BALDWIN**

No. 11

KNOW YOUR OWN PERSONAL SCIENCE

The rudimentary owner's manual for the human body is reasonably simple: Keep moving, try to get to bed at a reasonable hour, eat something other than processed food, and don't drink and do all the drugs you want, at least not all the time. Unless you're running, swimming, or biking in something sponsored by Strava, you should probably forget about your BMI, your PRs, and your VO_2 max. And you should by all means stop counting steps, calories burned, minutes slept.

Obsessing over numbers like those will make you crazy or, worse, they'll make you boring, like some artificial intelligence version of yourself.

But you should know something about your science. The body, as we understand it, is a complex, interconnected series of interactions: the respiration of oxygen, the processing of glucose, the production of insulin and cortisol and that sweet, sweet dopamine. Mankind has never known more about its physical function than it does right now, for better and for worse. So why not focus on the better and get a window on your physiology?

Opt Health is a telemedicine platform—with packages from \$95 to \$645 per month—that can give you access to that science and let you monitor your function with a depth and precision that was previously available only through a physician. The startup has plenty of doctors, of course, and their program starts with a comprehensive blood test that provides 55 data points about your physical function. It can get really granular, but the big things it addresses are glucose, to see how your body burns carbohydrates (key for weight, diabetes prevention, and general nutrition); hormone levels (yes, Opt Health will sell you supplements for low testosterone, for example, but in a smarter, more holistic way than those Instagram scams will); and inflammation, the invisible source of dysfunction and decline as you age. It can even reveal disease.

Opt Health's plan may entail potassium supplements or a concerted effort to sleep more or sit still less. It might also suggest a decrease in seed oil or a boost in B12. Then it gives you a dashboard via the app so you can manage and monitor your own science going forward. And while it may seem like it's about trying to live forever, it's really about living better right now. Get the science of living down so you can make the rest a work of art. —M.H.

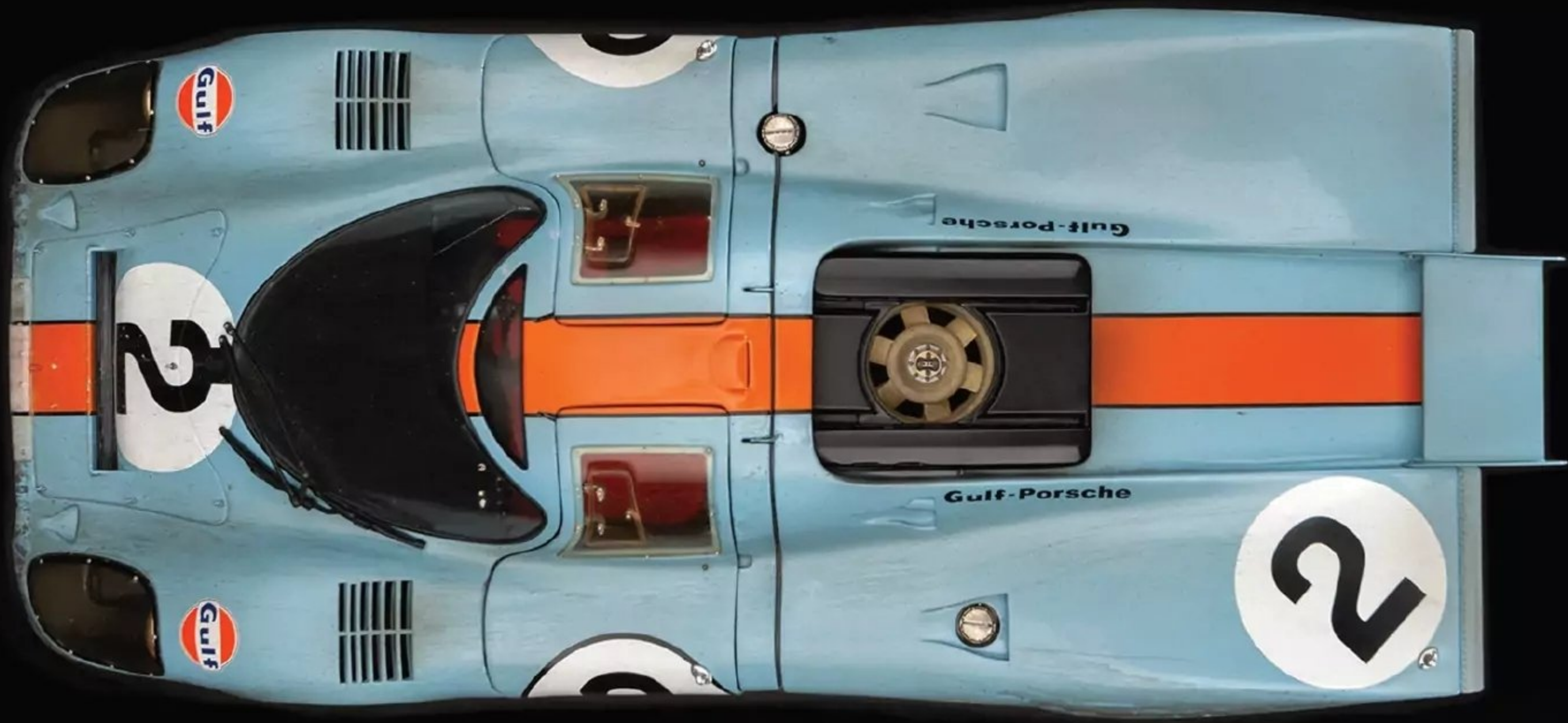
PHOTO AND COCKTAIL BY DANTE WHEAT



THE "IYKYK," AN ULTRALUXE RIFF ON THE CLASSIC VIEUX CARRÉ COCKTAIL ON OFFER AT NEAT BOURBON & BOTTLE BAR IN LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

NO. 12 DRINK A \$1,000 COCKTAIL

The Prohibition-era "IYKYK" libation from Neat Bourbon Bar & Bottle Shop in Louisville, Kentucky, will blow your mind (and, at \$1,000 per coupe, perhaps your budget). This sublime off-menu riff on a Vieux Carré, courtesy of mixologist Dante Wheat, employs rye and Benedictine from the 1930s, cognac from the 1920s, modern vermouth and bitters, and two gold foil-wrapped cherries—"because we can," Wheat says. Follow it with a Florida Snow, a \$13 cocaine-inspired margarita that numbs your mouth via Buzz Button-infused tequila. "It's supposed to taste like sitting in a Miami hotel bar on Christmas Eve in 1982," Wheat says. Indeed, it does. —SEAN EVANS



AS RACED TO VICTORY
AT THE 24 HOURS
OF DAYTONA ON
JANUARY 30-31, 1971



IT TAKES A
SMALL TEAM OF
CRAFTSMEN
OVER 450 HOURS
TO BUILD AND
WEATHER
EACH MODEL.





ARTISANS IN BRISTOL
USE ARCHIVAL IMAGERY TO
PRECISELY APPLY
WEATHERING DETAILS.



NO. 13 BUY A \$26,000 TOY RACE CAR

THE MOST eye-catching detail of Amalgam Collection's newest model of the Porsche 917K, a 1:8 scale replica of the car that won the 1971 24 Hours of Daytona, is the price: \$25,810. A Mitsubishi Outlander Sport costs \$23,000. For the cost of this 24-inch model, you could drive off in a full-size car.

Amalgam's 917 comes in almost a dozen versions: 1:8 and 1:18 scale variants, Martini and Gulf Oil liveries, car-wash clean or combat-weathered. Not only are every seam and curve identical to those of the actual legendary Porsche, even the grime coating its Gulf livery perfectly matches what was on the car that crossed the finish line at Daytona. As Amalgam's jovial CEO, Sandy Copeman, puts it, "We're not just randomly throwing dirt on it willy-nilly."

Copeman's company started out 40 years ago building prototypes and high-end architectural models for the likes of Norman Foster, then pivoted to automotive replicas in the '90s after making models for Formula One teams like Jordan Grand Prix and Williams Racing.

These days, Amalgam trafficks in limited-production replicas of everything from race cars to production vehicles; one of its biggest clients is Ferrari, which commissions scale versions of its one-off Special Projects cars for their millionaire owners. It was the Prancing Horse's interest in creating heritage models that led Amalgam to explore Le Mans cars, which brought the business to Porsche's iconic 917. "It's such an important car in the history of Porsche," Copeman says.

For replicas of classic vehicles like the 917, it takes up to 4,500 man-hours of development before work begins on a single salable copy. Separate teams hand-assemble the interiors, the bodies, and the frames before the parts are combined. It's nearly as involved as creating a real race car—just much, much smaller. — **WILL SABEL COURTNEY**

NO. 14 FEED YOUR FRIENDS LIKE MATTY MATHESON

HIRSUTE, MOUNTAINOUS, and wall-papered with tattoos, Matty Matheson bestrides two Americas: the one that knows him from FX's *The Bear* as handyman Neil Fak, the goofy, could-be Post Malone roadie who fixes toilets and breaks up the show's unbearable tension with brief gasps of comic relief. And the one that knows him as a lauded chef with 13 restaurants across Canada, the author of three *New York Times* bestselling cookbooks, and a YouTube food star with hundreds of videos ("Fever Dream Duck Confit Crepes," "Hot Honey Chicken Sliders Make Me Feel Things").

Matheson doesn't have much time for dinner parties these days—"Now I just host kids' birthday parties," says the father of three, calling from his home in Fort Erie, Ontario—but he does have some strong opinions on how to throw a good one. For starters? "A sit-down dinner is kind of lame," he says.



► Rizzo's Wedge Salad, as seen in Matheson's new cookbook, *Soups, Salads, and Sandwiches*.

► "THERE SHOULD BE A BOUNTY OF FOOD."

Rather than one showstopper dish, Matheson says he recommends "lots of yummy shit"—most of which require no actual cooking and little prep time. Open with a giant bowl of caviar with potato chips and sour cream. Add "a couple boxes of really good Hokkaido uni" and a DIY hand-roll station: hand-chopped tuna, rice, nori, wasabi, pickled daikon. From there, "a big platter of fried chicken goes a long way." Fry it up before your guests arrive ("You don't want to be on display cooking") and serve it alongside a bowl of hot honey and a tall stack of pancakes, which he deems a more natural pairing than waffles. Round it all out with "a little gem Caesar salad situation" and a bowl of tater tots and queso. "The best kind of party is where there are no rules," he says. "You can sit down, you can stand up, you can slam a bunch of hand rolls and mouthfuls of caviar and a couple fried chicken bites."

► "HAVE BEVERAGES IN ICE BATHS THROUGHOUT YOUR HOUSE."

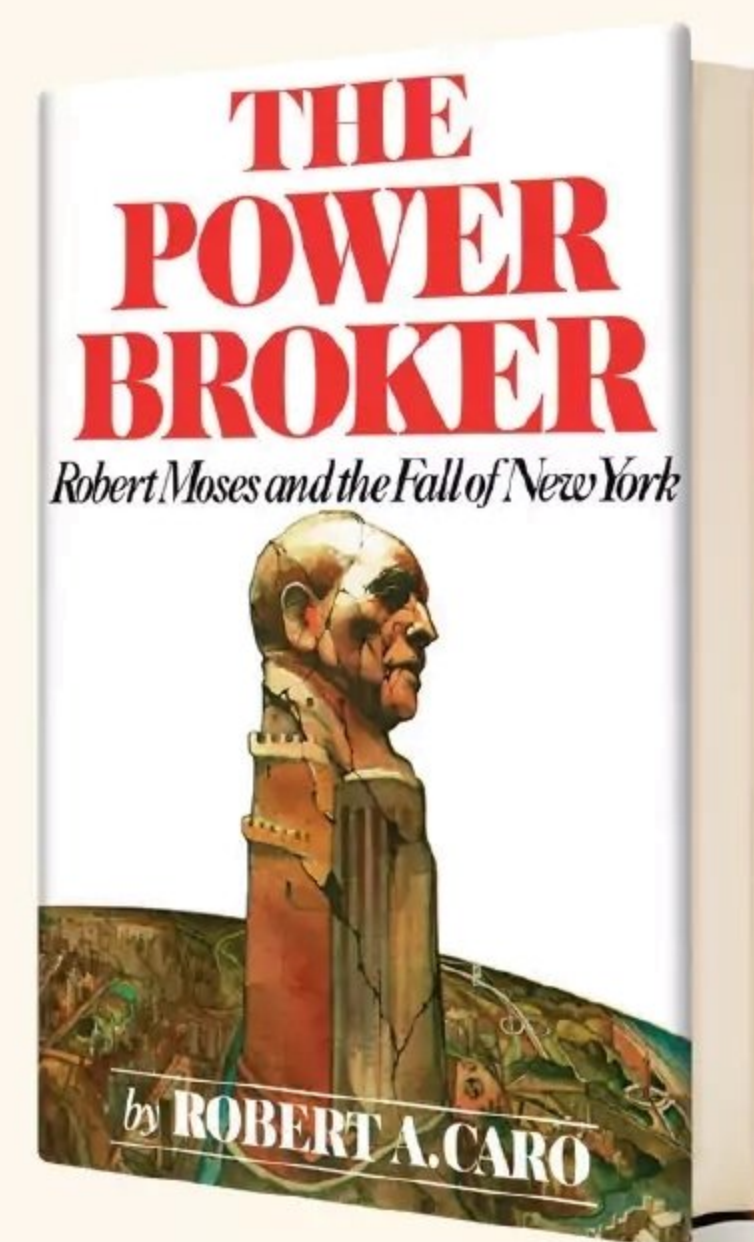
"I love walking into a room where there's a help-yourself ice bucket full of beer and soda," Matheson says. While he's been sober for more than 10 years, he suggests a big bowl of margarita punch or pineapple punch simply "because it's nice to ladle something out."

► "NEIL YOUNG IS NEVER WRONG."

"You want to set a positive, welcoming vibe," says Matheson, who prefers albums to playlists. "If you put on a good album, that vibe will carry you 30, 40 minutes." Go-tos include Jennifer Castle, Nick Cave, Ben Howard, and Neil Young. "Or, if you want something more upbeat, then put on America."

► "NO DUDS ALLOWED."

"What makes a good party is the people," Matheson says. "Literally, at our wedding, I was like, 'No duds.'" He considers 10 people the magic number and suggests inviting friends with a shared experience—"like my old roommates from college or the cast of *The Bear*. Actually," he adds, "it would be funny to mix my real friends with some of my celebrity friends now, like Jamie Lee Curtis, Oliver Platt, and Jon Bernthal. If we got Jamie Lee Curtis there, everything else would be fine. She would run the room. Everyone would be excited." —ELLEN CARPENTER



NO. 15 TAKE *THE POWER BROKER* OUT OF YOUR ZOOM BACKGROUND AND ACTUALLY READ IT

For a certain kind of guy, reading Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* isn't really something you do but something that happens to you. One night you go to sleep, a moon-eyed boy with visions of *Fortnite* emotes dancing in your head, and the next day you wake up, Gregor Samsa-style, a bug-eyed man obsessed with parkways and local zoning regulations.

Published in 1974, this exhaustively researched 1,300-page biography of legendary New York urban planner Robert Moses has become a rite of passage: an intellectual status symbol and a signifier of good taste. Beyond being a prominent prop in Hinge profiles and Zoom backgrounds, it's also a straight-up great book; Caro's reporting grants access to a world that's as deep and rich with lore as any fantasy series, and his writing is as propulsive as that of any thriller. There's a reason that Barack Obama said he was "mesmerized" by it.

Just as Moses indelibly reshaped New York City, Caro has left his mark on everything from narrative nonfiction podcasts to prestige TV. Without the scope and ambition of *The Power Broker*, there would be no infotainment like Dan Carlin or *Serial*. Moses was the original antihero before *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* made antiheroes cool; he was the one who knocked (down thriving working-class minority communities). *The Power Broker* isn't just the story of how a city works—it's a blueprint for what culture would become. —J.T.

no. 16

BUY A WINTER COAT THAT MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE A BOSS

IF SARTORIAL ELEGANCE has priorly escaped you, turn it all around this winter with a statement coat. A strong overcoat can tie any outfit together, and we're partial to Reiss's Gable wool blend single-breasted Epsom iteration (\$540, reiss.com). It's thick enough to keep you warm during frigid outings but roomy enough to accommodate bulky sweaters, all while looking slim and trimming. It comes in seven colorways, including a versatile camel hue that works well with any shade of denim and a multitude of dress pants.

Looking to make a bigger statement? Opt for Corridor's Herringbone Raglan coat (\$700, corridor.com). A roomy, versatile topcoat, the original Raglan was developed for a British Army officer who lost an arm at the Battle of Waterloo and needed a greater range of motion. This version, crafted in Portugal with horn buttons and 100 percent Merino wool, offers a nicely modern update—one that will keep you feeling loose yet dignified.

For the rough-and-tumble gent, consider a waxed trucker jacket. Specifically, Flint and Tinder's flannel-lined version (\$298, huckberry.com). Made from a water-resistant canvas (ordinarily used for boat sails) that's dipped in wax for extra durability, it's as functional as it is stylish. The flannel lining offers added blanket-level softness and warmth; you can rock it with just a T-shirt, should you wish. And the best part about a jacket like this is the patina it acquires over the years, which means it'll always look bespoke to you. —S.E.

THIS
HERRINGBONE
RAGLAN
COAT FROM VIBEY
MENSWEAR
BRAND
CORRIDOR
WILL LEAVE
YOU FEELING
COZY AND
IN CONTROL.

no. 17 BECOME A POD GOD

THE EQUIPMENT

Good audio equipment is more accessible than ever, and with a few tools you can sound as good as the pros. If you're recording an interview on a shoestring budget, try the Voice Memo app on your phone. Think of it like a point-and-shoot camera: It'll get almost everything within range, but it won't have as much depth and detail as bigger professional equipment. You'll also have to avoid tapping the table or rustling clothing unless you want those sounds recorded too.

If you want to sound more professional, the next tier up includes USB, Bluetooth, and lavalier ("lav") mics, which you can connect to your phone or laptop. Keep them close to your mouth so they hear you better than anything else. If you're recording a Voice Memo, try recording with the arm of a chair or the back of a couch in between you and your guest rather than the coffee table. You'll hear the difference in clarity. Whatever you use, record the interview in a lossless format like WAV files. As weird as it sounds, MP3s break down a little bit every time they're copied.

THE SETUP

Pick somewhere away from busy streets and buzzing appliances. For the cleanest results, record indoors in a "dead" room—one that isn't echoey. Bedrooms are usually better than kitchens and offices. Soft surfaces like carpets, curtains, and couches will soak up sonic reflections and make your interview easier to hear. Wherever you are, make sure you have water for everyone, to avoid sticky mouth noises. Don't eat a big meal right beforehand for the same reason. If you need to refresh your voice, try an apple.

THE INTERVIEW

Make a bulleted list of the topics you want to cover ahead of time and give your guest an idea of what you'll discuss so they can think about their answers in advance. But save the real conversation for

the recording itself, so that the answers feel fresh. If you have something difficult to discuss, save it for later on, once things are warmed up. Once you're rolling, give yourselves time to warm up before you get to the good stuff. If your subject is shy, you can always ask them to repeat something later when you're both in the zone. Don't be afraid to steer the conversation, especially at the beginning. Be clear about what you need. You can always say, "Let's talk about that soon, but first I want to keep focused on this." Stay positive and encouraging, and for a great interview, get them telling stories and describing specific details.

THE FILE

Name your file as soon as it's recorded, with some specifics about the date and subject, and the name of the project. If there are moments you'd like to cut, you have lots of options for editing programs, or digital audio workstations (DAWs). Some are free and professional, like Reaper and Audacity. Garageband is perfectly good too. Whatever your needs, there's an option for you—and a YouTube tutorial on how to use it.

THE TRANSCRIPT

If it's a long recording, have it transcribed, so you'll be able to read through it and see what you want to keep. Otter.ai and Descript are great transcription services, and there are many more. (Artificial intelligence has made this process incredibly fast and cheap.) The best transcripts have timecodes so you know just where to cut in the tape.

THE NEXT EPISODE

Don't wait to feel ready. Once you've gotten your materials together, get started. If you get stuck, there are many resources online. And if you need motivation, tell someone about what you're working on. Take things one step at a time, and don't forget to enjoy the process. Setting aside time to record can create a space like nowhere else. —JULIAN WELLER



A trio of offerings from bespoke travel company Black Tomato. Clockwise from top: Camping among Greenland's fjords; hunting with golden eagles in northwestern Mongolia; and grilling along the Colorado River.

NO. 18 GO DEEPER INTO YOUR SOUL

SOMETIMES THE MOST hedonistic thing you can do is unplug from the grid and go on a spiritual solo adventure. Boutique British travel agency Black Tomato specializes in bespoke expeditions, including individualized trips for restless solo travelers looking for more challenging activities than chugging daiquiris by a beach. Clients have trekked across the Mongolian steppe, hiked and biked in Chile's Patagonia region, and (with light supervision) navigated their way out of a Moroccan desert—all while relying on the company's deep network of local guides and experts.

Closer to home, but still completely disconnected from the world, Utah's Amangiri is beloved for its luxurious sense of serenity amid nature. The resort covers 900 acres of the Colorado Plateau, with 34 modernist suites integrated into the desert landscape. Even more remote, its Camp Sarika takes glamping as far as it will go:

a back-to-nature experience in the weathered mesas that includes slot canyon tours and accommodations in tented pavilions, each with its own plunge pool.

For seekers looking to totally disengage from life, the central Bali city of Ubud and its surrounding Indonesian rainforest are the ultimate destination. The remote Buahan, a Banyan Tree Escape literally elevates its guests above any tourists—up into the jungle canopy for the purest wilderness experience possible (though you'll still sleep in beds cooled by an innovative air-conditioning system). The designers took a "no walls, no doors" approach to their 16 balés, or private villas, each with breathtaking views and a private pool. A variety of ecotherapy experiences are on offer: moon yoga, sound healing, even a guided meditation session at the foot of the resort's own waterfall. —R.B.

NO. 19

BE THE FRIEND WITH BENEFITS

CAN FRIENDS BE LOVERS? In theory, sure. In practice, it's complicated. The stakes are high. There are many minefields. But like espresso and martinis, sometimes friendship and sex can go together. As a sexpert who's drawn to steamy and impossible relationships myself, here's how I would proceed.

READ THE ROOM. This doesn't have to be a good idea, but it has to be within the realms of healthy and appropriate. In other words, if your friend is married and monogamous and has never expressed interest in straying—I would not go there. If your friend is struggling with their mental health or real life problems, wait until they're feeling centered again.

SET THE STAGE. You gotta let your friend know you're a great fuck. The straightforward approach is to say, "You know, I have a magical [*insert preferred word for dick/pussy here*], right?" I mean, who's going to be mad about that? The slicker way might be a throwaway line about a recent relationship, like "He/she/they were really into the sex. They couldn't get enough. That always happens with me!" By the way, if that's a stretch and you're not even sure you're a good hookup, consider this a moment of sexual manifestation.

ESTABLISH THE PERMISSION STRUCTURE. Get cocktails at a tight bar where you know your knees will touch. Binge Bravo together on a cozy couch. A wave of passion might overcome both of you, but most likely you're going to have to put it out there. Be honest, direct, and confident. For example: "I want to kiss you. It does not have to change our friendship. If it feels weird, we can stop, but I actually think it's going to feel really good."

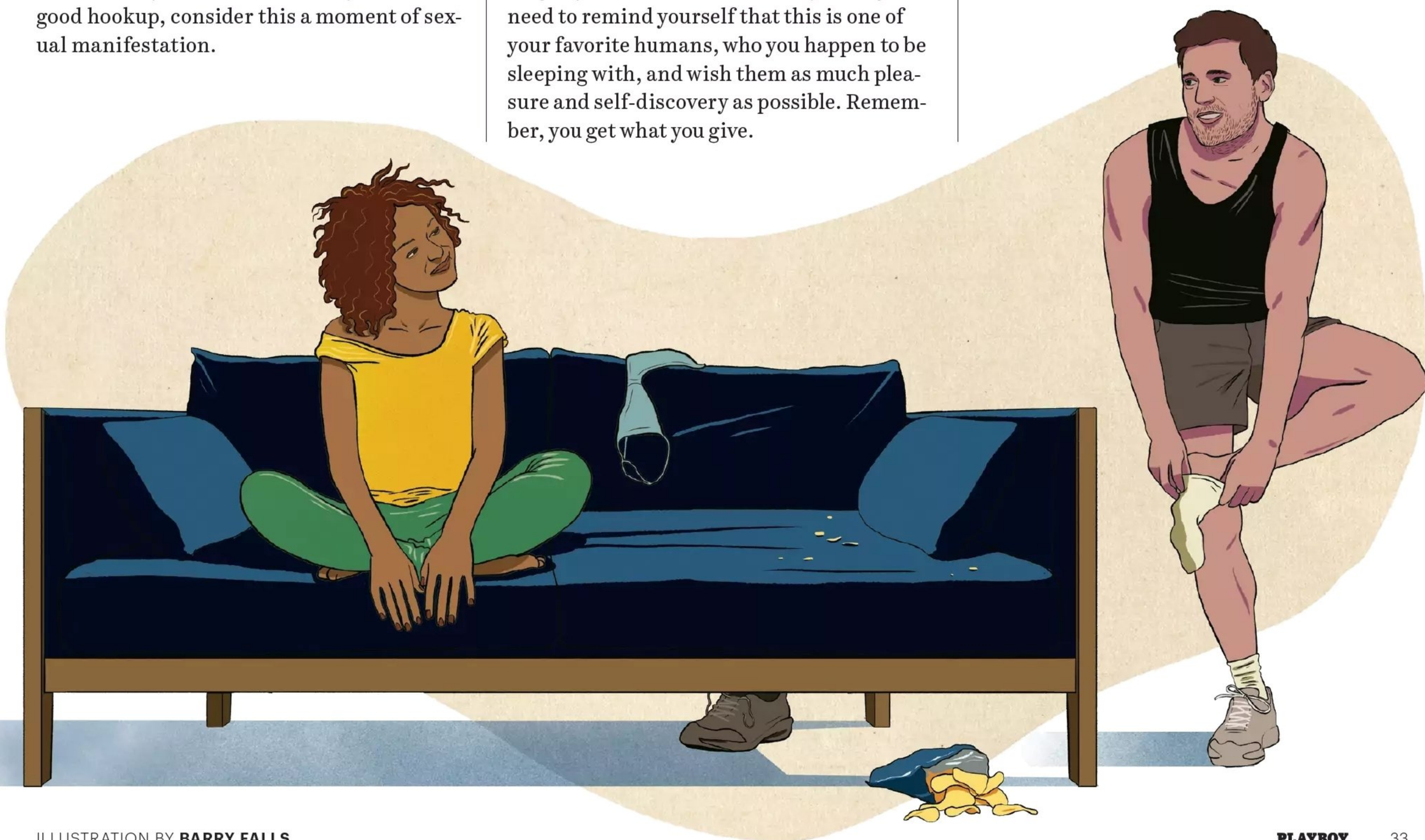
START SLOW. Then—if you get the green light—you kiss. And you'll see how natural and wonderful, or weird and cringe, it all feels. I hope your sexual connection is ridiculously hot. If it is, congrats: You're now in an FWB situation. Cool! But how do you actually manage the friendship and the fucking?

BUCKLE UP. I asked my friend Bailey, who is newly sleeping with her good friend, about the maintenance of it all. "You have to stare jealousy in the eye, right away," she says. "You have to figure out how to handle hearing about your FWB's dating and sex life, because that's the reality. You're both still single, ya know?" This is where you might need to remind yourself that this is one of your favorite humans, who you happen to be sleeping with, and wish them as much pleasure and self-discovery as possible. Remember, you get what you give.

HAVE AN EXIT STRATEGY. The most probable glitch is that one of you will catch feelings and push to become a couple-couple, and then it's awkward and potentially fatal. All you can do to preempt that pitfall is promise each other (and mean it) that if things get murky in the attachment department, you have the right to reboot the friendship, with no more benefits, and take the temperature way down. Maybe you can come up with a code word that signals "start over."

STAY COOL. Look, an FWB doesn't come with a playbook. The dynamic simply requires honest communication. Before they attended a mutual friend's recent party together, Bailey and her FWB discussed what they were comfortable with. Their decision? "Do our own thing," she says. "Flirt with whoever we wanted to...keep our little fling private...stay firmly in friend zone." That night, there was no drama. In fact, "if anything, our sexy secret added some heat." Which Bailey harnessed for a hookup with... another dude, whom she is also friends with.

—ALYSSA SHELASKY





NO. 20 DRIVE A FUN-SIZE BENTLEY

AS SOON AS I pulled onto Manhattan's West Side Highway, it started to rain. This wasn't ideal, as my car has no windshield wipers. Or windshield. Or windows. Or roof. But despite the precipitation, which soon stopped, I grinned as I toolled downtown, as did the people who saw me. Honks, shout-outs, waves, and cell phone cameras sprang from nearly everyone I passed, each asking some variation on the same question: "Cool car. What is it?"

This is a fair inquiry, as the \$115,000 Hedley Studios Bentley Blower Jnr doesn't resemble anything that's been on the road for a century. It's a highly accurate, hand-built, 85 percent scale, fully electric replica of a supercharged gas-powered race car Bentley built in the 1920s for an heiress-backed privateer team. The fragile Blower—named for the supercharger that blows more air into the engine's combustion mix—was a flop on the track but gained acclaim for its power and rarity. An original recently sold for more than \$1 million.

Founded near Oxford, England, in 2019, Hedley has made a business of creating diminutive electric adult-drivable five- and six-figure homages to seven- and eight-figure collectibles. It produces scaled-down 1950s Ferrari 250 Testa Rossas, 1960s Aston Martin DB5s, and 1920s Bugatti Type 35s. The Bugatti was Hedley's first effort, a nod to a miniaturized electric version of the pinnacle

French marque built between the wars for its wealthy clients' children.

Hedley believed its models would find similar traction among the offspring of contemporary supercar buyers. This was reflected in its cutesy original moniker, "The Little Car Company." But it's seen more adult customers compelled to use them, as mini avatars of cars they own (or aspire to own) or parked in their homes or offices as rolling sculptures. They use them to traverse their estates or as tenders on their yachts. One couple even race their pair down a lengthy driveway to retrieve the mail.

To date, the company has sold almost 500 vehicles in 50 countries, but the Bentley is the first that's road-legal. Limited to 25 miles an hour and holding 50 miles of range, the model offers new opportunities. Hedley's first U.S. retail shop opened in the Hamptons on Long Island this past summer. Blower Jnr drives to the farmers market or the wine shop seem like ideal use cases. There's a lockable trunk in back, more storage under the long hood, and even a rear seat, though that feature isn't exactly adult-size and requires clambering to access.

Having focused on cars from the mid-20th century, Hedley may expand into more contemporary fare. This would allow it to follow trends in the collector car market, which favor whatever vehicles are imprinted on the childhood memories of people in their



peak earning years. Cars of the 1980s and '90s—Porsche 930s, Ferrari Testarossas, and Lamborghini Diablos—thus currently rule the realm.

The Blower Jnr is pricey, pokey, and conspicuous. But the build and ride quality are high, it's more than capable of around-town speeds, it's eminently customizable (for a price), and it offers profound delight to driver and observers. Hedley's founder allegedly reserves a bottle of Champagne at headquarters for anyone who can sit behind the wheel and not smile. During my afternoon whizzing, open top, around Manhattan, a sun-tickled breeze flowing off the Hudson, I never ceased grinning. No Veuve for me. —**BRETT BERK**

No. 21 GO ON A JAPANESE FITNESS QUEST

Tired of your monthly gym fee? Make this the year you try a *misogi*. That's the word for an ancient Japanese Shinto ritual that involves cleansing yourself in an icy waterfall. The idea wasn't to improve mood, reduce brown fat, or whatever else the latest influencer shouts at you from his morning cold tub; the point was to purify the spirit with a dash of discomfort.

Lately, thanks in part to Michael Easter's bestselling book *The Comfort Crisis*, the *misogi* has experienced a renaissance in the fitness world. In its modern iteration, which Easter learned about from Harvard-trained sports scientist Marcus Elliot, you don't have to do anything involving cold water. You just have to go out into nature—and the territories well outside your comfort zone. “Misogis can show you that you had this latent potential you didn't realize,” Easter writes, “and that you can go further than you ever believed.”

How hard is hard enough? Easter says a *misogi* is sufficiently difficult if your chances of completion are less than 50 percent. For him, that meant spending weeks in the Alaskan backcountry. Other notable *misogis* include running the Grand Canyon rim to rim and paddleboarding across the Santa Barbara Channel. Whatever task you undertake, the first rule of *misogi* is you do not post about *misogi*.

Is it a bit extreme? Sure. But that's what it takes to test yourself in a way that's physical, psychological, and possibly spiritual. In other words, something you're not going to get doing a lat pull-down. —CLAY SKIPPER



No. 22 BUY YOUR OWN WHISKEY BARREL

CALL IT Wonka's Golden Ticket for whiskey lovers: Spirits behemoth Sazerac Company—owner of Buffalo Trace, Old Rip Van Winkle, and W.L. Weller—lets the winners of a lottery (and a few lucky journalists) select their very own barrel of bourbon.

At Buffalo Trace's distillery, in Frankfort, Kentucky, inside a metal rickhouse known as Warehouse H, you'll have the chance to sample bourbons from four barrels, rank them, then do another taste-test of your favorite two, this time blind, to determine your winner. No two barrels of bourbon mature alike, even those produced from the same mash bill, so you'll have to decide whether you want a flavor profile closer to that of Weller, say, or a funkier alternative. Each offering brings its own profile: harsher, tannic notes; a spicy finish; a soft maple-syrup deliciousness.

Once you've chosen a winner (we recommend the Weller Full Proof), you'll be asked

to sign your barrel's head, then hammer a plug in its top. From there you'll submit custom artwork for a label sticker, work with a licensed retailer to accept your bottles (Sazerac can't sell outside our nation's archaic three-tier system), and wait a few months for your barrel's contents to be bottled and delivered. You'll pay suggested pricing for these bottles, which seems quite reasonable considering that Weller Full Proof moves for triple that amount on the secondary market.

There's one final decision: whether to receive your empty barrel along with your bottles or have it sent to Mexico to be filled with another of Sazerac's creations, Corazón tequila. You'll have to decide whether you want to stand by for a few months for a reposado or more than a year for an anejo. Whichever option you land on, as you await the second fruits of your prized barrel's labor, sip a glass of your delicious bourbon. —S.E.

NO. 23

WATCH LIVE SPORTS LIKE AN OLIGARCH

GOING TO THE Olympics had always been on my bucket list. And it likely would have stayed there had it not been for a company called Roadtrips, which for 30 years has been planning high-end sports travel for guys like you and me. You know, people who want to go to Wimbledon or the Kentucky Derby or the World Cup but don't trust their friend Brad from Theta Chi to plan it.

For the Formula One Grand Prix in Monaco, Roadtrips might book a Saturday-afternoon yacht hang and—for a price—arrange for you to watch the race from inside the pit. But it's more than access. It's also logistics. The 2026 Winter Olympics are split between Milan and Livigno, an Italian town 150 miles away on the Swiss border. Roadtrips will assemble an itinerary that lets you see both downhill skiing and curling without spending the week stuck in traffic.

Travel to big-ticket sporting events has been steadily growing over the past decade, driven in part by documentaries like Netflix's series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*. In 2018 about 260,000 people attended the United States Grand Prix in Austin, Texas. Four years later, that number nearly doubled. Elsewhere, the US Open in New York saw record attendance in 2024. And the trend shows no sign of slowing down. According to UN Tourism, sports tourism is projected to increase at a compound annual growth rate of 17.5 percent between 2023 and 2030.

Roadtrips isn't the only agency catering to sports fans. Black Tomato, the luxury travel outfit, designed an America's Cup package in August, which included a privately chartered 12-person yacht—so you could spectate up close—and five nights at the Mandarin Oriental in Barcelona (starting at about \$15,000 per person). For the Super Bowl in New Orleans in February this year, a Houston company called On Point Events promises access to VIP parties all weekend (price on request).



► Luxury travel agency Black Tomato gave sailing fans the chance to see last year's America's Cup, held off the coast of Barcelona, from a private yacht.

Pretty impressive, right? Though a little part of you might be wondering: Are we really using a travel agent in the year of our Lord 2025? And I get it. But then I landed in Paris for last summer's Olympics, stepping into my suite at the Shangri-La, a hotel beloved by Jay-Z and Beyoncé. The city was crawling with celebrities, foreign dignitaries, and Snoop Dogg. How was this suite possibly still available? I'd barely decided to take this trip a month ago.

Technically, the room wasn't available. That's how a Roadtrips soldier explained it to me over coffee one morning. The firm had booked these rooms a full five years earlier, meaning a desk jockey at Roadtrips corporate was betting I'd catch Olympic fever. And that I'd want to be in this specific hotel, the one with the only Michelin-starred Chinese restaurant in Paris, which also happens to be within walking distance of the women's beach volleyball final.

"We took X number of rooms on risk," the rep said, acknowledging the obvious: Yeah, anyone might score last-minute tickets to the events. But even if you had great seats—which you probably wouldn't—where were

you gonna stay? Besides, if you're spending 10 grand on sports travel, maybe let someone hold your hand. Ideally in a white glove.

That's how Daniel Novelo sees it. Novelo, 47, runs a hedge fund out of Mexico City and brought 20 salespeople to Paris, enlisting Roadtrips to handle the dirty work. Roadtrips was able to secure his people some hot tickets, including seats for the men's soccer final. Novelo had used a different outfit to arrange his company's trip to Qatar for the FIFA World Cup. What sold him on using Roadtrips: "We were ready to pay twice the price if we get the great experience, the great recommendation."

Roadtrips was launched in Winnipeg, Canada, 30 years ago, mostly booking for corporate clients. But after the dot-com bust, the agency turned its attention to a less volatile market: rich people. And I have to say, the company makes a great first impression.

When we pulled up to the hotel, three Roadtrips employees were waiting outside with our printed itinerary, offering to make last-minute dinner reservations before escorting us to reception. What really separates the Roadtrips approach, though, is the company's on-the-ground army. If I wanted



▶ Roadtrips, a competitor, brings you inside the pit for the Monaco Grand Prix and curates an Olympics experience that puts you on your own personal podium.

to snag last-minute tickets for a few extra events, I wasn't waiting for some representative in another time zone to wake up. I was WhatsApping with my own liaison, who was staying in the same hotel.

Roadtrips partners with a local agency in advance of every event, from the Kentucky Derby to Wimbledon. (Before the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, a top executive actually moved his family to Cape Town for six months and enrolled his kids in a local school.) And all of that planning? It's about making sure you and your friends are in the right place at the right time. So something perfectly unplanned can happen.

Earlier that morning, a Roadtrips employee I promised not to name told me he'd come down to breakfast only to find a dozen French Olympians, including two high-profile athletes, splayed out on some couches in the dining room, "looking like they had been at an all-night party," describing it as "a scene somewhere between the Olympics and *Caligula*." I didn't see anything quite like that. Perhaps because I slept through breakfast. But I dig the vibe.

One Roadtrips executive likened its

offerings to "the Cheesecake Factory menu," which is a funny thing to say in the garden of a Parisian hotel once owned by a descendant of Napoleon Bonaparte. But he had a point. The 2026 Men's World Cup will play out across the U.S., Mexico, and Canada—some 104 matches in 16 cities over a full month. And the Roadtrips team is readying custom itineraries so you can follow your team across North America while testing the limits of your office's work-from-home policy. (A 15-night package starts at \$8,500 per person.)

My Olympics experience wasn't entirely flawless. There was an evening marathon for civilian runners one night, and I lost a mind-numbing hour figuring out how to cross the street back to my hotel amid all the road closures. I also could have used a heads-up that my seats for men's breakdancing were in direct sunlight and I should lather myself in SPF. And maybe bring a tent.

But all things considered, the trip was pretty seamless. Which is something I never would have expected to say about an event that brought a reported 15 million visitors to Paris. Beyond the sports, I also managed to squeeze in my own event: a French

wine-tasting class Roadtrips arranged for me, where I met an American track-and-field star who'd competed in the Tokyo games (but whose name I missed because I'd had nine glasses of Châteauneuf-du-Pape). I also met a grad student from the States who told me he saw Snoop shopping at the Zara in the 8th arrondissement. "That's the best Zara in Paris," the kid said.

That may be. But if anything, both Snoop and I could stand to dream a little bigger. At the women's beach volleyball final—a nail-biter between Brazil and Canada—I struck up a conversation with a Roadtrips customer who'd made his fortune importing beef. Which is so specific it can only be wildly lucrative.

The guy was in his 80s, maybe, but extremely well-preserved. He was in Paris with his wife, he said, but this trip was something of a test run: They were auditioning Roadtrips in advance of a proposed 20-person family trip. How was it going? Well, apparently. He'd seen three events already that day, at three different venues—with the help of a private driver idling outside. "That's the only way to do it at my age," he said. Or mine.

—MICKEY RAPKIN



NO. 24

GO SEE OASIS (AND STURGILL, AND MDOU MOCTAR)

OASIS: I knew the world was done for sure when Noel and Liam Gallagher decided this summer to reunite the world's most famous (and fractious) Britpop band. As a die-hard Oasis fan going back to my teen years—I was the one kid in northeastern Wisconsin who was emotionally invested in the mid-'90s with "Roll With It" topping the British charts over Blur's "Country House"—I initially responded to the news with delight. Not only was I planning to see Oasis, I arranged to catch the tour in London, with all of the other 47-year-old blokes from around the world. (I am self-bestowing honorary "bloke" status.) But I should have known that it was too good to be true. Noel and Liam making amends truly is "dogs and cats living together" levels of apocalyptic foreboding.

No matter: I still plan on seeing this tour, and I plan on it being good. Cynics will tell you that these guys are past their prime. And even when they were in their prime, all they did was stand deadly still onstage like statues erected to honor the patron saints of Mancunian drunkenness. But what these critics

don't understand is that Oasis stood deadly still onstage *like rock 'n' rollers*. They didn't have to dance, prance, flail, or sashay because their only job was being fucking cool. And when it came to Oasis and being fucking cool, business was always booming.

Oasis can come back in 2025 because there presently isn't a band that can stand deadly still onstage and be fucking cool. The lane is still theirs. They kept their cool, even in the face of [*waves hands*] all this.



Sturgill Simpson, aka Johnny Blue Skies, and bandmates Laur Joamets, Robbie Crowell, Kevin Black, and Miles Miller.

STURGILL SIMPSON: The best live act going right now. Sturgill is broadly classified as an outlaw country artist, probably because he hails from Kentucky and looks like he could have been one of Kurt Russell's brothers in *Tombstone*. But his current live show is less country, more like a hybrid of the Grateful Dead and Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band circa the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* tour. I know that sounds like hyperbole, but this is the end of the world, after all—desperate times call for desperate comparisons.

Kidding aside: Sturgill and his band go out every night and play around 30 songs for three hours. The set covers the breadth of his music—honky-tonk weepies, R&B-infused bar band rockers, psych-metal freakouts, frisky bluegrass. But there are also numerous covers—including the Allman Brothers Band's "Midnight Rider" and the Doors' "L.A. Woman"—that amount to a foreboding narrative about the darkness emanating from America's seedy underbelly. The jams all build to a climactic crescendo by show's end that blots out—at least temporarily—the



THE BLUESY
NIGERIAN
ROCKER MDOU
MOCTAR JAMS
IN MILAN.

menace of our national wickedness. But the underlying feeling onstage is joy. Simpson spent the past several years in the proverbial wilderness. After he ruptured his vocal cords in 2021 while on tour with Willie Nelson, it was unclear if he would ever play music again. Each time he walks on stage now, it feels like a resurrection. Each time he exits, he carries himself like he just played the show of his life. Every night has an element of rebirth and death. If that's not music appropriate for end times, I don't know what is.

MDOU MOCTAR: Would you rather go out with a whimper or in a blaze of glory? If you choose the latter—what's wrong with you people picking the former?—I implore you to seek out the reigning king of Nigerien guitar shredding. Moctar's story is straight out of "Johnny B. Goode": A native of Agadez, Niger, a town not known for an abundance of music stores, he literally built his first guitar out of wood and bicycle cables. From those humble beginnings, he slowly fashioned himself into a player who could meld the sounds of old-school blues and riffy classic rock with the expansive vibes of the African desert. It's a style that has crossed over internationally courtesy of popular Tuareg acts such as Tinariwen and Bombino, though in the past few years Moctar has emerged as the scene's hottest rising star.

You can get a sense of Moctar's live-wire intensity on albums like 2024's *Funeral for Justice*, which front-loads the anti-imperialist bent to his lyrics without skimping on the frenetic guitar solos. But the energy is truly ample on the stage, where his supercharged three-piece backing band supplies the constant *choogle* that courses through all his fiery songs. The overall package somehow registers as both joyous and furiously self-righteous, a thrillingly vital sound that will make you happy to be alive right up until the moment you aren't. —STEVEN HYDEN

NO. 25 LEARN TO DUNK

PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES experience things beyond what most of us ever can. There's no analogue in normal life for the rush of catching a Hail Mary; sending a good email will never feel like hitting a home run. Ultimately, the stunt fitness flex—running a marathon, say—reflects a desire to access sensations that seem inaccessible. In other words, you should learn to dunk.

Fortunately, throwing down on a 10-foot hoop doesn't need to be a tall task. "For the average guy, dunking is definitely an attainable goal," says Aaron Kogon, a certified personal trainer who's helped more than 2,000 clients explore the air up there. "You just have to train the right way."

Basically, it's a matter of physics. The average man is five-nine. Assuming he has a standing reach of 1.3 times his height, he's already three-quarters of the way to touching the rim before he even leaves the ground. "Over a year," Kogon says, "you can add over 12 inches. Even just in 10 to 12 weeks, you can add an extra six or so inches if you're dialed in."

The trick? Realizing there is no trick. "People think they need to do 100 squats and 1,000 calf raises every day, but that's too much volume," Kogon adds. "It's better to do two or three focused sessions a week so you have time to recover."

Like any fitness goal, dunking requires a gradual, intentional process. "The first step is the hypertrophy phase: You should be laying the foundation by building up as much muscle as possible," Kogon says. "Then, you can start working on adding strength through higher-weight, lower-rep sets. After that, you want to build up your explosiveness—instead of trying to move as much weight as possible, you'll want to move the weight as quickly as possible."

Finally, focus on jumping. "Find an adjustable hoop so you can nail down your timing and approach at a lower height before moving to a full-sized one," Kogon says. Once you're slamming and jamming, the real fun begins: posterizing your earthbound friends. —J.T.





THE COMEDIAN AND **CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM** STAR HAS AN ANSWER FOR EVERYTHING.

Q: I've been married for six years, and I love my husband. But I want to try ethical nonmonogamy. How do I get my reluctant husband to agree?

A: Sometimes the best way to learn how to swim is just to dive in—or, in your husband's case, to get pushed. Now, metaphorically speaking, you clearly wanna swim. My advice (metaphorically, of course) is: Take your husband to a pool party. Nothing is more damn enjoyable to watch than some free-spirited-ass people frolicking. Hop in, then ask your reluctant hubby to bring you a drink. Ask him to hand it to you. Get him to come right to the edge—trust me, he won't get close if he's not comfortable. And when he reaches to hand it to you, pull his ass in! He'll thank you in the end.

Q: The great thing about your character Leon Black—the best part of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*—is that he always tells women exactly what he wants. Can I be that direct without offending?

A: Leon is all about speaking his truth! He may seem offensive, but that isn't his intention. He's not about the bullshit, and people read that right away. He tells you exactly what the daily special is, details and all, and you either want it or you don't. And like in baseball, Leon is about getting in his at bats. He knows the more times he steps to the plate with his bat in his pants, the more chances he has of sliding across home plate.

Q: When I watch porn, I like it when the women talk dirty. I'd love for my girlfriend to try that, but that's just not her style. What can she do to get wild?

A: I'm guessing you're watching porn by yourself. That's your first mistake. You need to watch it together. Your second mistake is: You're trying to be yourself! If you want a filthy-mouthed partner, tell her to leave that tame shit outside the door. To really get that household cracking, you have to be two different people. Recast one of the pornos you're watching, your go-to, the one with your favorite filthy-mouthed actress. You and your partner take the lead roles and match it frame by frame. Call it porn movie night. To get shit popping, make some popcorn—pun intended—with plenty of butter. Shit's about to get slippery. You see, it's all designed to help her lose her inhibitions. Don't forget, though, as she loses her inhibitions, you also need to relax your expectations. Rome wasn't built in a night. Most importantly, don't forget to turn that shit off before you go to bed. The last thing you want to do is create a dirtier mouth than you want...be careful what you ask for.

Q: What are Leon Black's three major rules for a successful first date? And what are JB's?

A: For Leon, the No. 1 is *Location*. On a first date he never wants random ladies to see where Larry lives...for obvious reasons. No. 2: *Check your back*. This is extremely important in order to avoid the

possibility of the whole date being a setup orchestrated by an ex or a jealous boyfriend. Leon's been through that too many damn times. No. 3: *Never pay for your date... unless it's a good one*. Which means sometimes ya gotta dip.

For JB, the first rule is *Look Good*. Show up to the simplest place fashionably overdressed. All eyes on you. Second, *Be You*. I'm carrying no negative energy, only a single red rose. Third, *Shut the Fuck Up*. Listen more than you speak.

My bonus rule: *Show Up With a Full Tank*. Never have to stop to get gas on a date. Fill 'er up early, dumbass.

Q: What do you make of the tradwife trend and what this whole movement does to gender equality?

A: Now, I had to look this one up. Listen, what works for you and your partner is all that's important. Who's the breadwinner? Who's the homemaker? Who cares? I grew up with those roles being so defined, and then I watched a renaissance as things shifted. And now the tradwife movement is here and it's shifting back? The thing with trends is they change with the time. But just like decorating your house, sometimes the best motifs include elements from different time periods. It's all about balance—you need that feng shui.

Q: I'm a 43-year-old guy with a toddler, and my wonderful wife gives everything to pacify our little bundle of joyful terror. How do I make her feel seen for all her efforts?

A: You better be celebrating that damn queen! There's no more noble thing that anyone can do than raise a child. And even when couples say they're co-parenting, there's always one parent with the lion's share of the responsibility. Find a way to help out. Chip away at that toddler's reliance on his mom. It's delicate, though. You don't want to blur the roles for that toddler. Kids are observant sponges and can be real smart-asses. They'll manipulate shit. The last thing you wanna do is create a good cop, bad cop situation with that kid playing back and forth between the two of you. As for your lady, though, here's what you do: You love her, hug her, celebrate her, give her breaks each and every day. Let her know that watching the grace in which she goes about her tasks makes her even more attractive to you. You remind her that she has *two* titties...I'm just saying.

Q: I want to be a hat guy. What are your tips for pulling it off?

A: First of all, not every head is a hat head, so be ready to be honest with yourself. Take people you trust hat shopping with you and encourage them to be brutally frank. If they tell you that you look like a fucking idiot, take it to heart. But you also need confidence, as if that hat has to choose *you*. Once you and your hat have selected each other, you wear that damn hat everywhere—to dinner, to sleep, on walks, on a hike. You are trying to cultivate a relationship with it. That is your hat for all seasons. You want people to say, “Hey, here comes that hat guy!” See that when you and your hat have established a persona, you are inseparable.

HoneyBirdette

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Q: Leon Black is a horrible houseguest. What are the cardinal rules for long-term houseguests?

A: Some tips: Don't just come over. Tell your friend how long you're going to be there, and don't stay a day longer. That way, even if you get sick of each other, you both can at least count down the days until you're gonna get the fuck out.

Have your own stuff to use. People hate when you use up their shit. Set up a Costco order delivered there ahead of time. Get paper goods, like a 24-roll toilet paper pack and Brawny Paper Towels, the one with that big old white lumberjack on it. Keep away from perishable items, but make sure to order expensive shit like that POM drink and some of those delicious Toblerones—remind them that you like the finer things.

Take a day off. Call them one night and tell them you have other plans for the evening and don't wait up for you, you have other shit to do. Have them be curious as to where you were last night—that'll create the kind of mystery and intrigue that will keep your stay fresh.

Q: I'm a 27-year-old single woman, and my boss is older, and married, and is coming on to me. I think he's really hot, and I'm into it, so I'm definitely sending sexual signals. But I'm worried he's only into me because I'm young. If we have an affair, he'll lose interest and move on, right?

A: Now, normally I would suggest going to HR and reporting everything, but you seem to be a little into what's going on. My advice is to proceed cautiously. Love triangles can take weird turns. In your case, I would definitely document everything to give yourself plausible deniability, and then reach out to either the Lifetime network or, if you're Black, Tyler Perry Studios to negotiate the series and/or film rights. Worst-case scenario, have your family tell your story to *Unsolved Mysteries*.

Q: When I date someone, I fall hard and quick. People accuse me of love bombing, but I think I'm just being honest and in the moment. What should I do differently?

A: Listen to me: Slow the fuck down! You ever see someone fishing? Fishing is a popular sport. There are tournaments all around the world. Now, some people use bait when they fish. People like that are just out there fishing for a quick meal. They're used to hooking a small fish into their boat, gutting it right there, and coating it in some beer batter and eating it right away. Don't trust those people. Even worse, some people catch a fish, then gravely wound it, just like

date someone who's funny. Sadly, funny I ain't. But can I learn the craft?

A: The short answer is no. Unfortunately for you, the long answer is also no. But don't be discouraged. Even if you could fake funny once in a while—say, a well-timed hilarious quip—all you've done is create unrealistic expectations. Be yourself.

Q: I imagine dating is a lot like a career as a stand-up comedian: more misses than hits. How do you overcome rejection and build resilience?

A: I'm guessing you've had some really bad dates. Dating *is* a lot like stand-up. For instance,

“MY BONUS RULE: *SHOW UP WITH A FULL TANK*. NEVER HAVE TO STOP TO GET GAS ON A DATE. FILL ‘ER UP EARLY, DUMBASS.”

Kathy Bates did to James Caan in *Misery*, and leave it there in a bucket of water flopping around until they eat it later. Sound insane? Maybe, but I don't know you like that. I don't know your level of desperation, especially when you come on strong with all of that love bombing. See, what you need to do is stop using bait, go to a nice bait-and-tackle shop, and get yourself a lure. A lure is used for game fishing. You don't wanna just go fishing, you wanna go *game* fishing. You want your fishing experience to be an adventure. Explore catch-and-release. And let that damn fish make its own damn decisions. If that fish isn't what you're looking for, be willing to throw it back. It's a big sea, and it's full of fish.

Q: I'm newly single, and it seems like everyone wants to

you've got to learn how to handle the good nights and the bad ones. In both situations, the key is *undeniable confidence*. Never let them see self-doubt. Just like a date, an audience will smell that on you right away and tear you apart. Don't be scared, because the bottom line is you've just got to get out there. In stand-up, half the battle is walking out onstage and grabbing that microphone. In dating, half the battle is walking up to that person and making that first move. Remember, there's a lot to learn from bad dates. They help you develop your delivery, your style, your presence and your voice, and your go-to moves. Use those damn bad dates to explore who you are. Just like how some comedians are storytellers and some are joke tellers, you need to

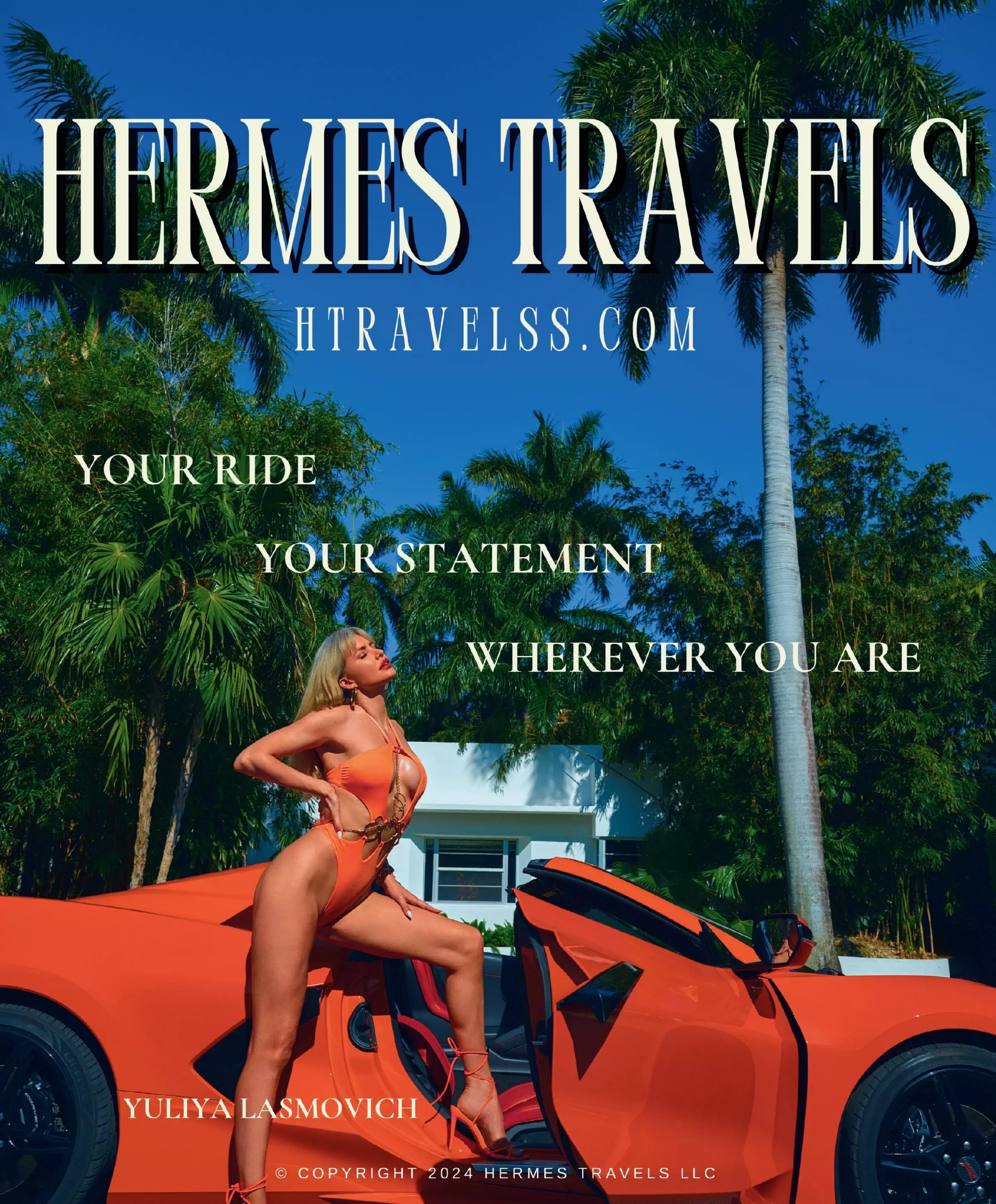
let that date know whether you are a winer-and-diner or a hitter-and-quitter.

Q: My wife and I moved to the suburbs, and our neighbors are a friendly older couple—so friendly, it seems like they're trying for a partner swap. We're intrigued. What is our next move?

A: Sounds like they're the professional swingers in this scenario. I suggest you follow their lead. I do have a question for you, though: When you say “older,” how old are we talking? For instance, using the popular classic TV sitcom *Frasier* as a point of reference, are they Frasier-old or Fraser's-old-ass-daddy-Martin-old? That's an important fact. Last thing you need when swinging is a broken hip. You never want someone's safe word to include the name of their insurance provider.

Q: My 13-year-old kid recently started identifying as genderqueer. How can I be a supportive ally?

A: Oh, y'all wanna go deep? First, let's identify the situation: At 13, your kid is no longer a tween, and one of the toughest transitions in life is going from a tween to a teen. And *maaan*, these days, kids are moving faster than ever. My mother used to call that “being a fasty-ass,” which is just really finding yourself moving faster than you can handle. Look, you mentioned being an ally. When you're a parent, being an ally isn't as simple as it sounds. I tend to think that the best ally is one who listens without judgment and offers support when necessary. My advice? First, surround that kid with love. Then educate yourself and encourage your kid to be informed. The balance between being a parent and a friend is delicate. Thirteen-year-old kids tend to have a lot of friends but are lucky to have at least one responsible, loving parent. You be that. 🍷



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5 CREATORS TO WATCH IN 2025



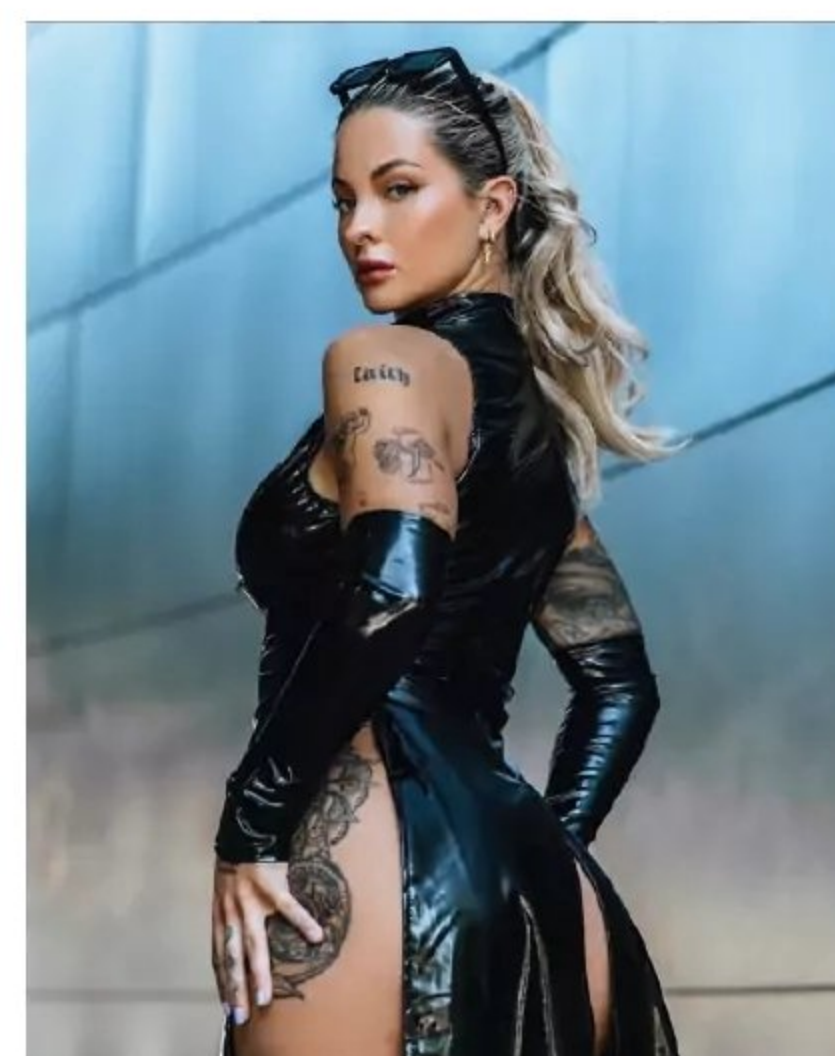
EMELIA HARTFORD THE CAR NUT

This 29-year-old auto influencer is best known for her YouTube channel and appearing in *Gran Turismo*. Her auto vlogging channel showcases her custom car work, and she's amassed almost 2 million subscribers. Follow her on TikTok and Instagram.



YAYA HAN THE COSPLAYER

In the cosplay world, few are as influential as this designer and entrepreneur known for her elaborate costumes, materials brand, and appearances on reality TV and at conventions. She has 2 million Instagram followers and counting.



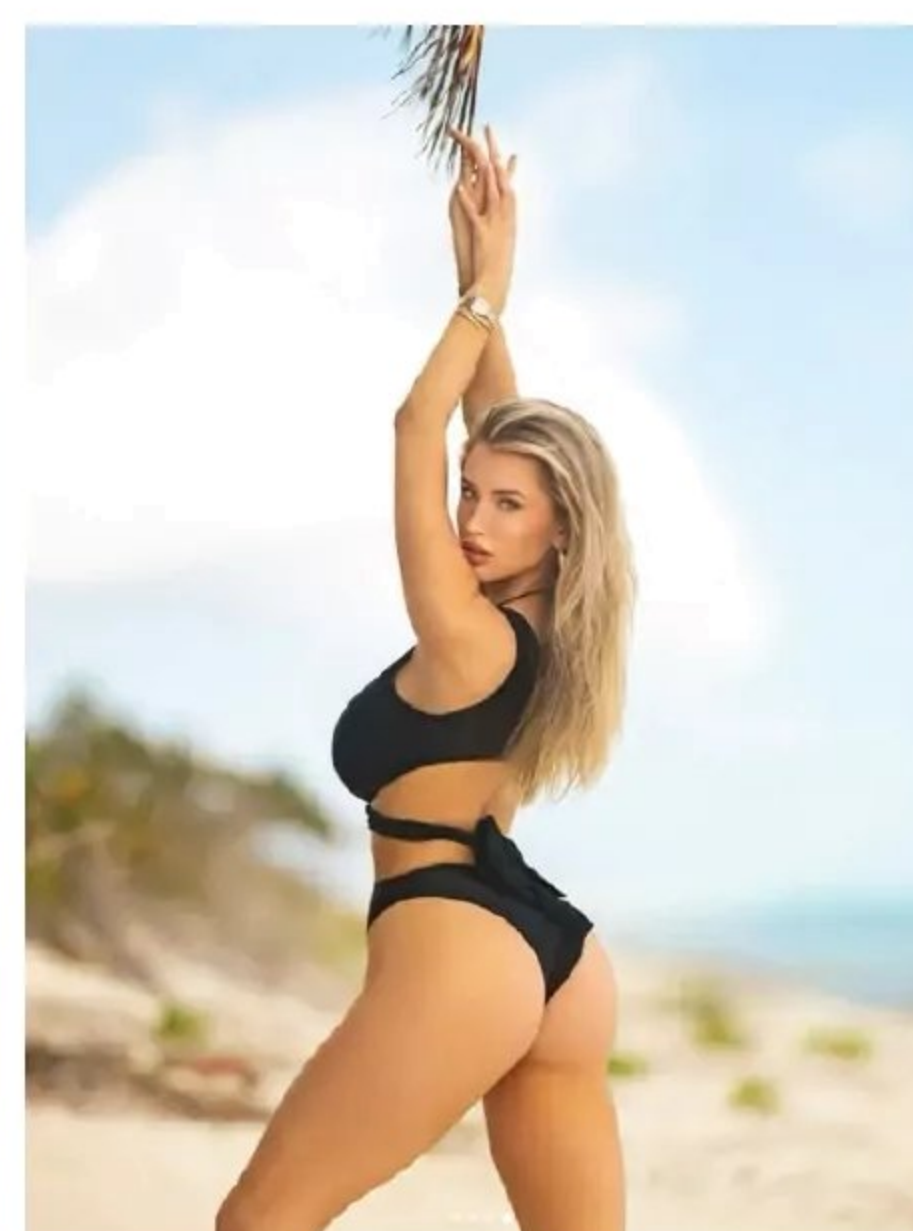
MICHELLE GONZÁLEZ THE WANDERER

This travel influencer is a walking testament to luxury and jet lag. With over 2 million TikTok followers, she's explored 80 countries, bringing fans cultural insights, simple travel tips, and a touch of eco consciousness.



ASHLEY RESCH THE BOSS

At 28, this entrepreneur grabbed a following as a model and personality at *Sports Illustrated* and TheChive. With millions of followers, she also founded Boss Babe Movement, empowering women as founders.



MIKAYLA DEMAITE THE ATHLETE

The 24-year-old Canadian started her career as a goalie in a professional women's hockey league. After a knee injury, she switched to modeling, becoming a brand ambassador for sports and fashion brands like SportX. She has 3.2 million Instagram followers and specializes in modeling shots and fitness routines, with an element of personality. 🐰



20 QUESTIONS:

ERIC CHURCH

THE COUNTRY SUPERSTAR HAS BEEN KNOCKED AROUND PRETTY GOOD, BUT HE'S TOUGHER THAN THE REST. **BY ROB TANNENBAUM**

Q1: Last time *Playboy* talked to you was 2013, after your third album, *Chief*, became the biggest country album of the year. How did you handle that sudden success?

CHURCH: I didn't handle it well. It was an overnight kind of thing. We'd started to have a little success with "Smoke a Little Smoke," but we were still edgy and on the outside of country music. You go from an artist that's always on the outside looking in, not even part of the industry, to all of a sudden being the darlings of the industry and winning awards. It happened so fast. In 12 months, it went from "We're not going to let him on the show" to "We have to have him in the front row, because he has the most nominations." I don't care who you are, that's *weird*. Doing our first arena tour, I didn't know where those people had came from [*sic*]. I thought they were there for "Springsteen" and for "Drink in My Hand," our first No. 1 songs. I didn't enjoy that part. I didn't even handle the accolades very well.

Q2: It feels like your reaction to the success of *Chief* was: OK, I've got a career, I have a foothold in Nashville, now let's get weird.

CHURCH: Yeah, that's what happened with *Outsiders*. The first song we gave to radio was "Outsiders," which is six minutes long and kind of prog metal. [*Laughs*] And they're like, *What?* That was fun, but it was just about trying to run away from *Chief*. You can hear it. Some people love *Outsiders*, some people hate it, but it's a moment in time where you can see I was having some struggles with success. "Don't like me. Try something else."

Q3: Let's go back to the start of your ambivalent relationship with mainstream country. In 1992 you were 15 years old and the two biggest country songs of the year were "Achy Breaky Heart" and "Boot Scootin' Boogie." Did those turn you off to country?

CHURCH: Country music was really big in the early '90s with my friends. Some of it turned me off, though. I played sports, I did all those things, but I was a little bit different. I didn't always go

Q5: When did you stop trying to fit into mainstream country?

CHURCH: The best stuff I was writing was the opposite of that. The first publishing meeting I had, I played four songs and the guy hated all four. I sang "Two Pink Lines" and he stopped me. "Is that what I think it's about? Pregnancy?" I said, "Yeah," and he kinda went, "Holy shit." So I played him "Pledge Allegiance to the Hag" next. He stopped me: "You mean pledge allegiance to the *flag*?" I said, "No—the Hag."

"I SEE ARTISTS WHO WRITE A SONG ON MONDAY, AND ON TUESDAY IT'S ON THEIR TIKTOK. AND THEN THEY'VE GOT ANOTHER ONE ON WEDNESDAY. THAT'S FOREIGN TO ME."

along with what my friends were into. I was a bit of a contrarian. My friends would tell you, they'd bring me their favorite music and I'd be the first to go, "Ehh." I was a little snobbish. I'm *still* snobbish. [*Laughs*] I like odd, weird stuff. I like to discover bands I've never heard of on [Steven Van Zandt's] *Little Steven's Underground Garage* show on Sirius.

Q4: In 2001, when you moved to Nashville, what was going on in country music?

CHURCH: When I came to town, it was the soccer mom era: Martina McBride, Sara Evans, Faith Hill, the Dixie Chicks, Terri Clark. Females were really prevalent on the chart. I knew I wasn't going to fit into that. The first song I ever wrote that was recorded was a Terri Clark single ["The World Needs a Drink"]. I was a songwriter, so it was like, hey, whatever gets on the radio, I'll write. [*Laughs*] I was studying the format to figure out what was successful.

He goes, "You're singing about Merle Haggard? It's 2002!" I played him "Sinners Like Me" and he stopped me again. "Is that a waltz?" I nodded. He said, "You played me a pregnancy song, a song about Merle Haggard, and a waltz?" He told me I should go back home to North Carolina. And those songs ended up making the bulk of *Sinners Like Me*, my first album.

Q6: Was he the only guy who didn't think your songs were commercial?

CHURCH: No, the same thing happened even after I finally got a publishing deal. I couldn't get anybody to cut my songs. Artists would say, "I love the song, but it doesn't sound like me." It wasn't what was happening in country music. And that's how I got a record deal. Mike Dungan [now-retired president of Capitol Nashville] could see a potential shift in lane with the industry. There wasn't a lot of testosterone

in country music. And we were one of the first artists that started to introduce that, so it stood out. And it went off the rails from there. It overconsumed itself.

Q7: You're referring to the long reign of "bro country"—songs about trucks, hunting, and girls in cutoff jeans. What's the current state of mainstream country?

CHURCH: Unfocused. I see artists who write a song on Monday, and on Tuesday it's on their TikTok. And then they've got another one on Wednesday. They do it again the next week, and the week after that. That's foreign to me. Maybe I'm the old guy who's yelling at clouds now, but I don't see how that works long-term. It's just an overload of supply. We're not making albums anymore.

Q8: It's a paradigm shift, isn't it? You and I grew up listening to entire albums.

CHURCH: We grew up in the album era. You get the album, you go chapter to chapter, like a book, you dig in, and you learn the artist. You spend time with it. It's hard to spend time with this stuff now, because every day there's another song. You can't really focus. When you've put out 200 songs in two or three years, how the hell can the consumer focus on that? How much of it is going to stick 10 years from now? That's why I used the word "unfocused."

Q9: You mention Stevie Wonder and James Brown in "Record Year." You've covered the Jackson 5, Aretha Franklin, and Prince in your show. Why don't more Nashville artists recognize that country and R&B are from very similar

roots? You even added a horn section and three R&B singers on your recent tour.

CHURCH: Yeah, *Exile on Main Street*-style. Honestly, I have no fucking clue why they don't, but they should. If you grew up in the era I grew up in, there's no way you weren't influenced by soul music. That's what made me who I am. Musically, I could feel it. I heard Bruce [Springsteen] say one time, "We're all just trying to be a soul band." That's what I want, 100 percent.

Q10: How far can country music evolve in sound before it's no longer country music?

CHURCH: Great question. There's now a hip-hop influence in country. In every song, the beats per minute are the same. It drives me bonkers. Every fucking song, exactly the same, because it's been successful. It's consumable and palatable, and every artist is trying to get in that line. Morgan [Wallen] is a good buddy of mine. He was one of the first country artists to mix in hip-hop. When I listen to the radio, I say, "Is that Morgan?" It's not, but there are at least 10 artists that sound like Morgan. We had that happen, too. After "Springsteen" came out, I heard tracks for a whole year that had the little piano lick and the same beat. You have to get out and move somewhere else.

Q11: "Springsteen" is an interesting case study. It was a huge song, but it doesn't really have a chorus, does it?

CHURCH: Not really. It doesn't even have a hook! It's just the last name of a guy. I thought it was a great song, and different, but I didn't think it would make the record. The piano was deliberately not in tune. It drives audiophiles crazy. I could feel the appeal of the song's nostalgia—with "Springsteen" or "Talladega" or "Round Here Buzz," we've done pretty good in our career on nostalgia. But I didn't think, "OK, that's the hit."

Q12: Why did you name your dog Quincy Jones?

CHURCH: [Laughs] I was a big fan. A fan of Michael Jackson, but Quincy Jones was a cutting-edge genius, as a jazz-based musician and producer, aside from what he did with M.J. He changed the game for popular music, which was very inspiring.

Q13: In 12 months, between 2017 and 2018, you had three events you call "life-altering." The first, in June 2017, was emergency surgery for a blood clot. Did you ask the surgeons about your chances of survival?

CHURCH: I didn't have time to ask. I couldn't move my left arm—it was swollen and purple. I was at home in North Carolina, so I drove myself to the hospital in Avery County at around midnight. The doctor I saw, I'm convinced he was a veterinarian. [Laughs] He told me I was having a heart attack and put an IV in my arm. I said, "It's not a heart attack." Thirty minutes later,

they said, "It's not a heart attack." Yeah, I know. They told me I needed an ultrasound, but they didn't have the right equipment. "We're going to take you to Boone in an ambulance." I still had the IV in. I said, "No, I'm good. I'll drive my car there. When I get to Boone, are they gonna put another IV in?" They said yes, so I said, "Just wrap it around my arm."

Q14: Why didn't you want an ambulance?

CHURCH: Because of the level of medical care I'd gotten there. So I drove to Boone. When you walk into an emergency room with an open line hanging out of your arm, they take you immediately. [Laughs] I saw people stop doing chest compressions just to help me. After the ultrasound, the doctor said, "You have a three-inch blood clot in the ventricular vein. It's got to come out right now." I asked him if it could kill me, and he said, "Yes. Today." I said, "OK, take me anywhere but Duke"—because I'm a Tar Heels fan and I'll be damned if I'm dying in Duke University Hos-

pital. And they took me to Duke [laughs]. They couldn't chopper me, because of the vibrations—they were worried the clot would shake loose. So we drove for four hours while I was strapped down like a convict. It was a long time to think about your mortality. It was brutal. By the time I got to Duke, it was 10 o'clock the next night, and I hadn't been to bed for almost 24 hours. When I got there, the vascular surgeon was already scrubbed up and waiting on me in the ICU.

Q15: A few months after you recovered from surgery, you were back on tour. One of your shows was at the Route 91 [Harvest] music festival in Las Vegas. Two days after you played there, a gunman opened fire on the crowd. He killed 58 people and injured hundreds. He fired more than 1,000 rounds. Why don't we have gun control in this country?

CHURCH: Listen, I'm a constitutionalist at heart. I believe in the Second Amendment. And I'm a gun owner as well as a country singer, a format full of gun-loving fans. But this guy was able to get weapons of war—machine guns, ARs, AKs, bump stocks. What's the purpose of an AK? You're not gonna hunt with it. You're basically giving people a better tool to commit mass casualty. People use the line with me, "Guns don't kill people, people do." I always respond, "If you give a muzzleloader to someone who wants to commit mass murder, how much damage can they do?" Maybe a person or two, but not 100. I attacked the [National Rifle Association] after that, which I stand by, and I got excoriated for it. There's just not a place for weapons of mass casualty. That's my opinion now, and it'll be my opinion in the future. I would debate anybody on that.

Q16: You definitely pissed off some people. I read a Fox News article about your recovery from surgery, and the comments underneath it were



Church, with Michael Jordan, at Church's downtown Nashville venue, Chiefs. April, 2024



"If you grew up in the era I grew up in, there's no way you weren't influenced by soul music. That's what made me who I am."

all about your politics and how you should shut up and sing. What are your politics?

CHURCH: Politics bores me. I don't get it. Some people think I'm a liberal, which I think is funny, and others think I'm conservative. As I get older, I'd say I lean marginally to the right. I've encountered some of this while trying to raise money in North Carolina after Hurricane Helene. I've said to Democrats and Republicans, "I don't give a shit what party you're in. I just want to put people in homes." I'll go to both sides of the aisle in order to get it done.

Q17: The last life-altering event was when your brother, Brandon, died in June 2018, after a heart attack brought on by alcoholism. Did you know he had a drinking problem?

CHURCH: Yeah, I did. He'd been in and out of rehab, for drugs and alcohol. He had moments when he was doing really well, and moments when he wasn't. He was a sweet guy who was trying to figure life out and had some challenges. But he's the reason I didn't leave Nashville. He dropped out of college, moved here, and we shared a one-bedroom apartment. He slept on the pullout sofa and sold hot dogs on Printers Alley. And whenever I said I wanted to leave, he said, "No, we're staying." His death was a dark thing for me.

Q18: Did it cause you to reconsider your own drinking or drug consumption?

CHURCH: In a way. I keep attuned to it, because it's an occupational hazard. When I was younger, I drank a *lot*. As I've

gotten older, I just can't do it as much anymore. And I don't have the same addictive demons that he did, thankfully.

Q19: You became a minority owner of the Charlotte Hornets in 2023. What would you change about the NBA if you were in charge?

CHURCH: Before we got involved with the Hornets, I would've told you I was a college basketball fan, because of the integrity of the game. But now, half the college players are getting paid and half are not. It's like minor leagues for the NBA. I'd like to change the allocation of resources for mid- to small-market teams. It's not equitable. If you're a free agent—let's say Donovan Mitchell—and you can sign with any team, you'll probably go to a major market, where you can be on national

television all the time. The Celtics are on TNT pretty much every game; Charlotte gets two national games a year, and no Christmas game. I think there should be some reallocation of equity, so small- to mid-market teams have more contract flexibility, maybe in the form of a higher salary cap.

Q20: Spoken like a small-market team owner. You bought your share of the Hornets from your golfing pal Michael Jordan. Michael is a notorious fan of gambling. How much of your money has he taken on the golf course?

CHURCH: *[Laughs]* I've not played Mike for money. That's a fool's game. He's got an incredible club in Florida that we go to, but I'm not a sucker. I wouldn't compete with Michael Jordan in anything—except music. 🎸



WHAT HAPPENS IN NASHVILLE... ENDS UP ON INSTAGRAM

A WILD WEEKEND IN AMERICA'S BACHELORETTE PARTY CAPITAL.
BY SARAH MILLER

“YOU HAVE TO OPEN your throat,” Alexis, a cancer nurse with electric blue eyes, coaches her fellow bachelorette party attendees on shotgunning a White Claw. The bride-to-be, named Madison, and Olivia, a fellow bridesmaid, concentrate as best they can with six other women shouting “*whooo*” and Megan Thee Stallion’s “Girls in the Hood” cranked to full volume.

Cans are punctured. The *whooooos* intensify. “Remember, it has to hurt. Otherwise you’re not doing it right,” Alexis says. Action! The cans snap open as the crowd goes wild. Alexis wins handily. As the other two women continue to power through, she pats her neck and says, “Ow. Ow.”

Nashville is second to Las Vegas as the most popular bachelorette party destination in the United States. About 150,000 individual women making up 4,000 to 5,000 bachelorette parties will come to Nashville this year to raise a glass—in the case of this group, an estimated 15 to 20 of them a day—to the future wife status of one of their circle. Women come here to drink in Airbnbs, hotel rooms, pedal bars (a kind of mobile bar where you pedal and drink at the same time), and the famed honky-tonks of Lower Broadway. They do other stuff too, but mostly

they drink.

All weekend I will vacillate, while also drinking, between the exuberance of the authentic participant and the dull remove of the anthropologist. I’ve never been to a bachelorette party in my life. I’ve only been in one wedding party, my sister-in-law’s, because my mom made me. Finally, I am separated after an 11-year relationship. Only one of these women is not engaged, married, or seriously paired up. They are full of optimism for the future. They giggle about men or simply adore them, whereas I, and many of my friends, tend to speak of romance in terms of regret and disappointment.

This party includes seven bridesmaids, one maid of honor, and a bride, all pretty. Kaitlyn, blond in a black dress, works in public relations and has stunning teeth. Alexis comes from a long line of talented shotgunners and wears a denim miniskirt, a short red top, and red cowboy boots, ordered for this event from Amazon, just like the other five or so pairs of cowboy boots being worn tonight. Kayla, Madison’s fraternal twin, works in real estate. The tassels on her hot pink halter top swing to and fro, a metaphor for her enviable capacity for pivoting from work calls to party mode. The rest of the group is in simple black: Lauren, Rory, and Olivia are all nurses, while Megan, in marketing, wears, and does not remove, a purse with a pink bandanna tied to the strap. Every time I look at her, I think we’re about to leave.

“Drinks on Broadway are expensive, so you’ve got to drink as much as you can before you go out,” says Annette, 25, the youngest in the group. The rest are in their late 20s, except for Rory, who’s 30. Annette, dressed in the palest pink, pulls at the matching penis

straw in her White Claw. She met Madison “trauma bonding” in law school. I can’t list where everyone knows Madison from. They all are from Ohio and still live there, so let’s just say everyone knows her “from Ohio.”

...

The dress code, which astonishes me as I have never heard of such a thing for *hanging out*, and am working up the nerve to ask about, is as follows: Thursday night, lingerie for playing games at the Airbnb; Friday day, for the transportainment pub crawl, cute black athleisure.

It is Friday. Thursday night, they were severely overdressed for the dive bar where they played darts. “But everyone was nice to us anyway,” Rory says. “They gave Madison dog bowls full of beer.” Did she...drink from them like a dog? She did.

The groom, Spencer, whose face is printed on cardboard fans and temporary tattoos that the women have applied to their own persons and will be applying to any man willing to accept one, is handsome, with even features and good hair. Madison and Lauren strike a back-to-back pose against the Instagram-friendly wall of plastic ivy. Olivia is in pink sunglasses, her hair feathered off her face, like a seventies movie star. She helps me apply a temporary Spencer tattoo, then heads to the bathroom for boob tape to make her slip dress more user-friendly. I ask if boob tape works. “Boob tape is just what you’d expect: hell,” Alexis says.

The drinking game we’re playing is complicated as fuck. They might as well be teaching me to play bridge. I realize, too, that the anthropologist feeling is just a nice way of saying that I have made a visit to a different stage of my life, the one where the future is a big shiny question mark rather than a laugh track that goes on too long and eventually transitions into screaming. No, I’ve never been to a bachelorette party before, but I’ve never been on a gambling cruise either, and if I were embedded with a bunch of women my own age on one of those, I would probably feel right at home.

“Drink!” Madison points at me. I drink.

Now for a time-honored bachelorette party tradition. A cartoonish cutout of a man’s body is pinned to the wall. He is anatomically correct minus one little detail—I think we can all guess what that is. Whimsical penis stickers, penises with snake markings, glasses, dressed up as donkeys, are distributed. I think of a story I was told at my hotel about a suit that sustained \$2,800 in damage due to penis stickers alone. These girls would never do that.

Madison asks us questions about the groom and spins us around less if we’re right and

more if we're not. Madison asks Alexis what stupid reality show Madison and Spencer first bonded over. "That's easy, *Tiger King*!"

I go last. "What's my fiancé's name?" Madison asks.

"Sam?" Wrong. My Rodney Dangerfield-esque phallus ends up on Spencer's elbow.

"Imagine men playing Pin the Vagina on the Woman," I say.

"That would never happen," Alexis says. "Men can't plan shit."

Alexis is the most forthcoming about her life. Her boyfriend will propose when they have more money. She expresses frustration that he's not as good at shotgunning as the rest of her family, which seems to me a complaint made in lieu of other complaints.

bachelorette experience. I am awestruck by the crowd. It's like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time, if the Grand Canyon were made of drunk people.

It is a thing for bars on Broadway either to be owned by music stars or, in some cases, to simply license stars' names. There's Blake Shelton's Ole Red, Jason Aldean's Kitchen + Rooftop Bar, Lainey Wilson's Bell Bottoms Up, and Morgan Wallen's This Bar & Tennessee Kitchen. Residents joke that these bars, most of them huge, with several floors, a different cover band on each floor, sometimes a DJ and dancing, sometimes a roof deck, tend to be interchangeable and don't have individual personalities that reflect the names on the door.

Post Malone/Morgan Wallen song "I Had Some Help": "You thought I'd take the blame for us a-crumblin'/ 'round like you ain't guilty of somethin'/ Already lost the game that you been runnin'/ Guess it's catchin' up to you."

People fall in love and then they fall apart, thanks for the memo, Nashville. My Yuengling lager disappears quickly. Why is this song following me? Madison fans herself with her fiancé's face. Alexis says her parents are on and off, and she hopes they will be back on soon.

At a bar called Valentine's, the singer wields PG-13 stripper moves in a sexy gingham romper; the bass player stands still, exuding Valkyrie powers, in a cleavage-bearing red leather nudie. Drunk men stare like they've fallen asleep on a plane with their eyes open. The bride-to-be and her party stand around dancing, holding their purses and occasionally taking photos. I have no idea what they're saying, I can't hear anything. A man about 40 approaches me, speaking incoherently. "Do you have an English accent?" No. "Are you hammered?" Yes. "Are you OK?" He's OK. A bunch of drunk guys hold up a sign that says "THE BOSTON BOYZ" and scream for a selfie. The singer wants \$20 for requests—cash, or any cash app under the sun. The cash app of a drunk guy in a Spurs T-shirt doesn't go through and the sexy romper singer shakes her head with a pouty frown, like a little girl refusing to eat her peas. I absolutely have to get out of here.

...

I wanted to get a sense of why Nashville is such a destination for bachelorettes, so I spoke to Ben Oddo, a local comedian and journalist who stars in the short film *Nashville Bachelorettes: A Ben Oddo Investigation*. He began with geography: Half of the U.S. population is within a day's drive of Nashville. A 2013 *New York Times* story crowned Nashville the next "it" city, following in the footsteps of places like Portland and Austin. Bachelorettes coming here have a ready-made itinerary: Lower Broadway, a shirtless cowboy show (thank God we didn't do this), a mural tour, the pedal taverns or other "transportainment." As Nashville has grown as a bachelorette city, so has the number of businesses with names like Nash Bash, Bach Babes, and Bach & Boozy that help women plan their best weekend ever.

It's also just a very brandable city. "Women think of this place and say to themselves, 'I can put on a cowboy hat and Daisy Dukes, that makes for a good photo,'" Oddo said. Bachelorette parties make up only a tiny percentage of the 16.2 million yearly visitors to Nashville, but residents complain the



I wonder if someday she'll think worrying about not having enough money to get married is a walk in the park compared with being married.

When Madison starts saying "Trader Joe's" when she means to say "*Tiger King*," all deem themselves sufficiently trashed for Broadway. Waiting for Lyft, we jig in a circle to the Irish Descendants' "Rattlin' Bog," chugging drinks. "If anyone sees a nipple cover on the ground, pick it up, because it's probably mine," Annette says.

August is the slow season for bacheloretting, but young women in white surrounded by similarly attired friends are, if not ubiquitous, certainly about. When Madison runs into another bride, they might embrace and take a selfie. Lower Broadway, a mile-long strip of bars, is at the heart of the

Even if you were hooked up to an oxygen machine with a priest on standby and the Grim Reaper holding his beer, you must show your ID at the door in Nashville. No "wow, I haven't been carded in" jokes here, please, they've heard them all.

We began the night at Miranda Lambert's Casa Rosa Tex-Mex + Cantina. "Cover band" has kind of a bad connotation elsewhere, but since this town is full of musicians, every band we hear is great, especially if you love country music—the major thing we all have in common. Everyone except me is upset that the roof deck isn't open. It is agreed we will pee and split. The cover band, long-haired dudes in their 30s, putting in their time on Broadway, coping with the crowds of drunk tourists until their ship comes in, is singing a gut-punching verse of the same

city known for country music is now known for women in their 20s and 30s running around hammered in pink cowboy hats. Oddo's conclusion, after "spending more hours thinking about bachelorettes than I care to admit," is that bachelorettes are an easy scapegoat for a rapidly growing, heavily tourist-trafficked city. "I'll take bachelorettes over the tourists at, say, Mount Rushmore."

...

In the morning, dressed obediently in my black yoga outfit, I eavesdrop on their conversation about engagement rings near the cubbyholes outside the hot yoga room. "I travel with a fake one, I got it on Amazon," says Annette. Megan's diamond was loose in hers and she freaked. Everyone listens intently to Annette's suggestion of insuring rings with homeowner's insurance. This is so not my arena. Plus, I am smarting a little from a glance at Madison's Instagram, where she called Spencer "my rock."

I had a rock once. It tumbled down a hill. That's hard, but maybe what's worse is when you get to a point in life where you feel like you're running out of time to get it right. Maybe Madison is so happy not just because she's marrying the love of her life but because she knows that if five years from now he's just some guy on a fan in a box of fans she needs to clean out of her storage space, she can find two or three more loves of her life before she even has to start dyeing her hair.

I join Rory and Kaitlyn on the porch. How many bachelorette parties have they been to in the past year?

"Ten?" Kaitlyn guesses. Rory nods. About 10.

TEN?!?

"This one is pretty good, dress code-wise. I didn't have to buy much," Rory says. Kaitlyn agrees. She attended one in Austin with a "galactic space cowboy" dress code.

After lunch we walk down 12th Street. I hang back with Madison and finally ask about the dress code. "It's so people know that you're a bachelorette party," she says. "So you get noticed." So it's like wanting to include the whole world in the celebration? "Yes, and also you might get like a free drink or shots or something," she says.

Pregaming is shorter than the night before, and I also arrive later to give them space. Tonight they're in blue and green. I completely forgot. Luckily, I have a sort of bluish gauzy kimono middle-aged goddess type garment over the black slip that I am trying to pass off as a dress and there isn't enough boob tape in the world for my situation so I'm wearing a visible bra that I hope is "a look" and not "a disaster."

I brought Champagne, mostly for myself.

After a huge glass of it, I ask Lauren if she is ever freaked out about how fucked up the world is. She sees so many horrible things working in the emergency room that she tries to leave it all behind outside of the job. "We can't control life, so we might as well just enjoy it," she says. Her eyes soften when I tell her I don't have any friends who are able to just accept life on its own terms and enjoy it. "Maybe you need different friends?" she suggests. I don't think this is true, but even if it were, we have different senses of what's possible. Hers goes all the way out to the horizon, mine ends at the "No Wake, 5 mph" buoy.

The women are hopeful that the roof at Miranda Lambert's will be open, and we find



"IMAGINE MEN PLAYING PIN THE VAGINA ON THE WOMAN," I SAY. "THAT WOULD NEVER HAPPEN," SAYS ALEXIS. "MEN CAN'T PLAN SHIT."

ourselves in line again. "Just like we never left," says Megan, who has shown herself to be somewhat of a dark horse in the humor department, though I asked her if she had any complaints about her life and she said, "Not really," which I did not find funny at all. The mild humidity lays a flattering filter over everything, the drunkenness, the lights, the sounds of the crowd. Our table overlooks the Bridgestone Arena, which is lit up with hundreds of lights in pink and red. More group selfies are taken at flattering angles.

Two 35-ish men appear and are

immediately festooned with groom tattoos. They join the selfie action. One of them leaves and returns with shots. His friend is horrified. "Dude, no. Wrong move."

"Yikes, that's a lemon drop," Kaitlyn says. "I can smell it from here." It takes me a minute to sneak the contents of my mouth into my empty beer bottle. The other women are similarly unstoked. They want the bachelorette party to get likes, but no one should then slide into its DMs. The women have put lots of tattoos on random game guys in the last 36 hours, and this shot buyer was the only one who didn't move the fuck on.

We shake off the guys and find the dance floor. The Kelly Clarkson song "Since U Been Gone" comes on. Everyone knows the words; we sing like children in our bedrooms in front of the mirror. "Love Story" by Taylor Swift comes on. Everyone in the club goes crazy, like we're all on trampolines. I think, "Wow, I am unreservedly partying as promised," and then, without warning, all of the women file out. Wait, we are leaving?

We're leaving.

The party ends not with a bang but a whimper at the Taco Bell Cantina, where the doorman is tattooed and selfied. No one orders a drink. A bride-to-be from New York, told I'm writing about bachelorettes, would like a word. She's short, blond, wearing a skimpy yellow dress, shouting unrequested opinions. She doesn't even like Nashville, but she came here because she wanted her family to see how weird it is. "Nashville is basic but iconic," she says. "Did you hear me? Basic but iconic."

As I eat a Cheesy Gordita Crunch, also a first, Alexis asks why I've never been to a bachelorette party. "Wow, I don't know," I say. "A lot of my friends eloped. A lot of

them, I guess, are just—gay guys?" Maybe I was the kind of person who didn't know the difference between a real feeling and good copy. Maybe that's why this was the first bachelorette party I'd ever been to and why I had to invite myself.

She says she'll be thinking about me, and my relationship. "Shit sounds like it's fucked up," she says. "But I still have hope for my parents." She says I should have hope for myself too. "Weddings are great," she says, "But there's nothing like a comeback story." ♫

THE BULL

THE LAST TIME LAMBORGHINI sold a sports car packing a V-8 engine, INXS was topping the charts and Cindy Crawford was on our cover. This year's all-new Temerario will once again cram eight cylinders between cabin and rear axle. But this is a whole

new kind of raging bull.

Since the brand returned to the category in 2003, its "entry-level" sports car has been powered by a naturally aspirated V-10. First came the Gallardo, which redefined—and helped save—Lamborghini,

introducing some much-needed quality control while capturing buyers in search of a supercar that can actually perform.

The Huracán came next, and quickly reset expectations about how fast and wild a "starter" supercar could be.

In less than a decade, buoyed by its dazzling V-10 engine, Lamborghini went from a washed-up automaker to a serious competitor of Ferrari and Porsche. In 2025 exit the V-10, enter the V-8-powered Temerario. Not only does it



THE ALL-NEW LAMBORGHINI TEMERARIO
DOWNSIZES ITS ENGINE BUT CRANKS IT ALL THE WAY UP.
BY WILL SABEL COURTNEY



RAGES ON

have two fewer cylinders, it makes history by adding the first turbochargers to a Lambo engine—and for the second time, the brand is offering a hybrid.

Why? Government regulations played a role; making the engines more efficient increases

sales of the Temerario and last year's hybrid V-12 Revuelto. But ultimately, it came down to the best reason imaginable: Lamborghini wanted more power. Combine the output of the Temerario's turbocharged V-8 and three electric motors,

and you wind up with 907 horsepower—one-third more than the V-10 ever made. The V-8 also revs to an utterly insane 10,000 rpm. That's higher than any road car in history.

Don't count out gas-guzzlers yet. The Gallardo was in

production for 10 whole years, as was the Huracán, which followed. A decade-long lifespan seems all but guaranteed for their successor. And the version at launch is usually the tamest. The Temerario you see here? It's just a jumping-off point. 🐍







THE RISE OF THE BETA MALE

FOR MORE AND MORE MEN, THERE IS NOTHING HOTTER THAN REJECTION. THE MEANER THE BETTER.

BY MAGDALENE TAYLOR

JEREMY IS ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES. At five feet 10, he's tall enough. He's slim and muscular—he can run a three-hour marathon. He's had girlfriends before. He even has one right now. But something turned in him when he was 18 with his first girlfriend, who loved to call him a loser and treat him as such. She particularly liked to do so in front of her friends, making him perform acts like picking the foliage from a thorny rose bush and crushing it bloody in his hands as a prerequisite for hanging out with them. Ever since, humiliation and pain have been inextricably connected to sex, guiding how he navigates his dating life. His current girlfriend may not indulge him now, but there are plenty of women online who will give him the digital equivalent of a kick in the balls in exchange for \$20 to \$50 at a time. Over the years, he's spent tens of thousands of dollars on these thrills, often working delivery gigs on top of his computer science job to better support the habit.

Jeremy refers to himself as a “beta male,” an embrace of the supposed alpha-beta hierarchy that's colloquially come to define masculinity in popular culture for decades. He is one of many who, either unwilling or unable to fulfill the roles of traditional dominant manhood, have leaned in to the alternative. But unlike many of their incel counterparts, angry about their status, these beta males have come to sublimate this rejection into a sense of erotic fulfillment.

Most others in the self-identified beta-male community fit within a demographic that much hand-wringing has been devoted to: the celibate young male. Over the last 20 years, the frequency with which all of us have sex, regardless of gender, age, marital status, sexuality, or income, has declined. The most notable shift has occurred among those we'd likely consider the horniest of all. Between 2002 and 2018, the proportion of men age 18 to 24 who reported having no sex in the last year increased by 63 percent, to one in three young men. Studies of men age 30 and under have yielded similar results. Meanwhile, data from 2023 highlight that 63 percent of men age 18 to 29 are single, compared with only half that of women of the same age.

How exactly does this add up? Perhaps it simply doesn't. But it speaks to a common narrative: All the girls are getting picked up

weekends and is just as content to read alone in a coffee shop. But privately, he is entirely wrapped up in his virgin status—in a way he's come to enjoy. The term *virgin* is one he and others in his online community wear with pride. He runs a Discord server called Adult Virgin Losers, where members essentially take turns humiliating one another over their sexless status. "We talk about being adult virgins, post pictures of our penises, and generally talk each other down," David says. "We have guys on there in their 30s and 40s. I like seeing older adult virgins with unusually small penises. I find them erotic to talk derisively towards."

In these chats, he enjoys leaving comments on people's posts like "No real woman is ever going to want to fuck you," with cry-laughing emoji, reminding fellow members that "weak losers stay pussyfree,

"Now I really love being a virgin, and I've worked myself into a situation where I'd probably be losing something if I ever had sex."

Even if he can pinpoint no concrete turn at which pain became pleasurable, he enjoys it just the same. "I like my feelings to be hurt," he says. "For me, anxiety, worry, and emotional hurt are closely related to arousal."

Thus, much of the pornography he consumes—which is, naturally, a lot—centers on these themes. He prefers content that focuses on just how much of a loser he is, how emasculating it is to be an adult virgin, how it's an obstacle he will never overcome, one that only becomes more formidable as he ages.

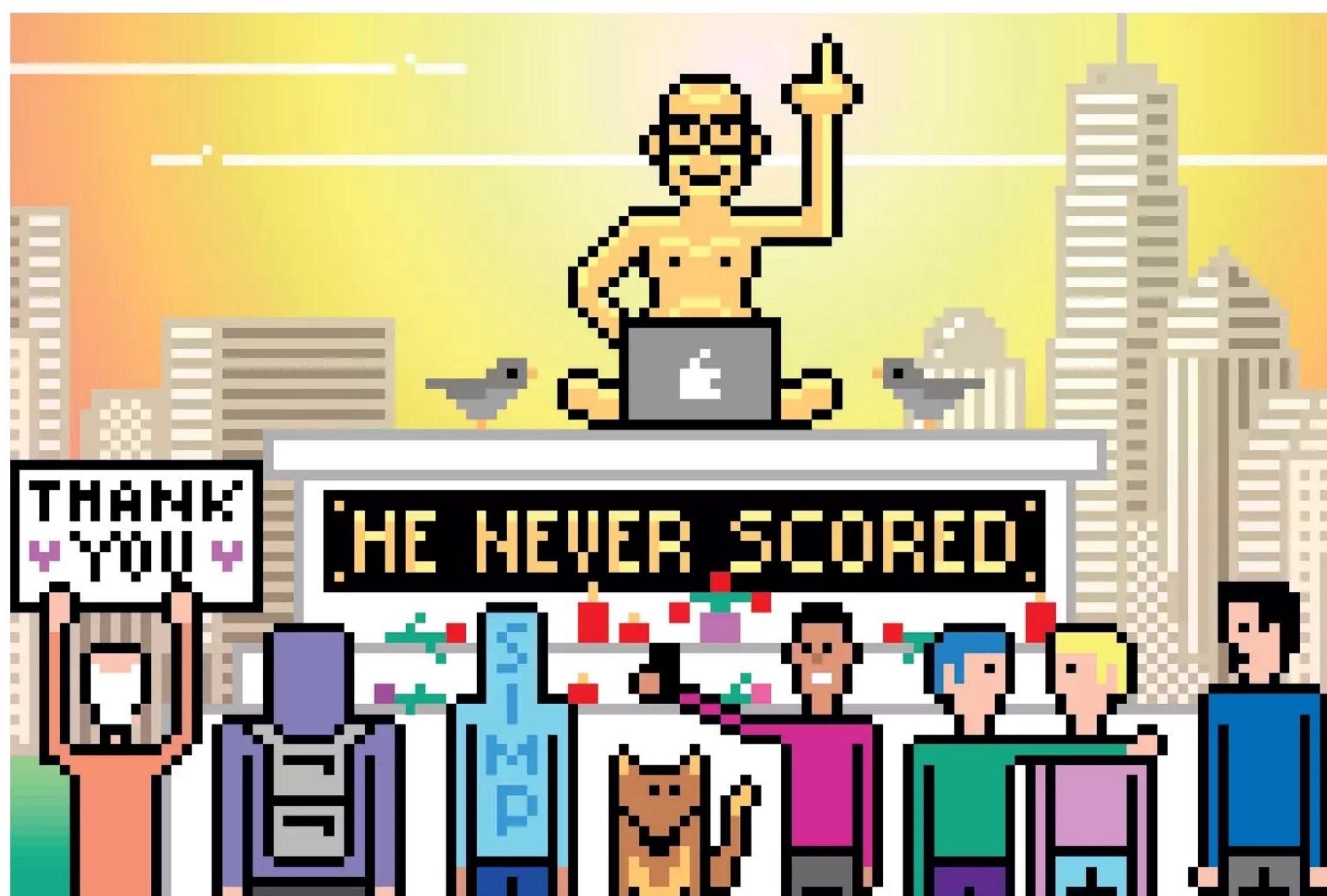
"I especially like that last theme, the idea of adult virginity being this red flag for women and a general problem that will just

only continue to worsen in a vicious cycle until I'm a 40-year-old virgin with zero experience and insane fetishes that would make it impossible to ever lose it or get a girlfriend," David says. "I'm a loser already who should be ashamed but will only become a bigger loser. I like stuff that negatively compares me to other men alongside this and makes me feel a sort of cuckold anxiety. In general the main feeling I want to experience is strong anxiety—anxiety and arousal mixed together, and it's absolutely fantastic and so potent."

For some, all of this is merely an ultraspecific fantasy. There are many other men like Jeremy who otherwise lead relatively ordinary sex lives, yet can't escape the muddled desire

for something in between pain and pleasure. Porn, then, is an easily accessible indulgence. Almost everyone in these beta communities refer to themselves as porn addicts to some extent, though this, too, may be part of the fantasy. There is no shortage of porn that embraces not only virgin humiliation but porn addiction as well.

"Repeat after me: I'm proud to be a virgin, I'm proud to be a pervert, I'm proud to be a porn-addict," one "pussyfree" porn account posted on X in August. Another: "Stay a virgin and stay pure for porn. You'll never want to have real sex because porn provides so much pleasure."



by 10-out-of-10 Chads who manage to date multiple women at a time, while the rest of the loser guys are relegated to staying at home by themselves watching porn. There's no point in them even trying, so they might as well just give up.

If you can't beat 'em *and* you can't join 'em, you might as well sexualize your plight instead.

"I am a 27-year-old virgin male," David says. David describes himself as "nerdy"-looking and overweight, but not entirely unattractive. He makes good money—more than his friends, of whom he does have a healthy few. He goes to pubs with them on

dominant alphas get laid." This group and others like it form the core of David's social life. He works an office job and otherwise sees himself as a bit socially withdrawn and shy. Neither dating apps nor attempts at meeting women in real life ever really worked out for him. "I guess I never took the initiative as much as guys should, but I did ask some women out when I was in a position of hanging out with them a lot. I used to feel a lot of jealousy, bitterness, and resentment over my sex life and my social limitations, but the more I started to fetishise my sexual inexperience, the more comfortable I became with it," he says.

As Bob, a 29-year-old “kissless virgin,” says, porn let him begin to embrace his status as a virgin in the first place. “I was a normal guy, then in Covid I found fem-dom,” he says, referring to the fantasy of being dominated by a woman. “I tried denial and it kept me more frustrated—I thought about porn way too often.” He began looking at more porn on X, which led him to Discord, which then led him to the topic of virgin humiliation.

“I started to fetishize my virginity,” Bob says. “Before that I was afraid to tell people on the internet that I’m a virgin. Now I have no problem with it, I promote my virginity fetish everywhere. Porn is our substitute for sex. We virgins like to push each other deeper. Dopamine from watching porn definitely helps, it’s our safe zone.”

Even Jeremy admits that he is “addicted to beta porn,” as this side of his sex life lives entirely online. For many others, this online life *is* their life as a whole. They see it as both the cause of their situation and a salve for it.

Sexual submission has always had a psychological component. Pain, of course, is physical, but like any fetish there is a deeper meaning to it. The stereotypical dominatrix client is a high-powered businessman who craves an outlet for his desire to finally not be in control. Among beta males, this isn’t quite the case—while some are in fact high-achieving in other aspects of their lives, many embrace the identity as a lifestyle. In these cases, submission isn’t some sort of alternative escape, a straightforwardly masochistic desire to be inflicted with pain: Among the beta males, being told you are destined for life as a sexless loser is absolution.

The idea that there’s a natural order that’s placed them at the bottom, say many beta males, is easier to accept than the possibility that they have failed to become appealing. It isn’t that you didn’t work hard enough, that you didn’t get a good enough job, that you don’t go to the gym enough, it’s that you are destined to always be on the lowest rank of sexual desirability.

“Ugly, weak, pathetic, awkward and low T beta males stay virgin,” David wrote in the Discord server’s general chat in mid-September during one of many conversations about why they remain virgins. “That’s just the rule of sexual competition.”

“Sexual competition is super hot,” one user responded. Another replied that the conversation had him “leaking” from his chastity cage.

Themes of abjection are often prevalent in related porn, too. On the subreddit r/Virgin_Humiliation, for example, one of the top posts is a photo of a woman from behind having

“I REALLY LOVE BEING A VIRGIN,” SAYS ONE YOUNG MAN. “I’VE WORKED MYSELF INTO A SITUATION WHERE I’D PROBABLY BE LOSING SOMETHING IF I EVER HAD SEX.”

her thong pulled down. Above the picture is a caption reading “How angry does it make you that 18-year-old studs are enjoying this POV while you struggle to imagine how amazing the inside of a wet vagina feels as you cope with your handpussy behind a computer screen like the virgin loser that you are?”

Much of this content is made by the men themselves, improved by recent advances in artificial intelligence. “One of my favorite AI audios has the voice acting as a therapist,” David says. “You told her you’re a virgin and she drops a hard truth on you—you will never lose your virginity at this point, it’s too late. Yes, that makes you a loser, but you need to accept it because it isn’t going to change. She says something like ‘You need to accept you will be a virgin forever, and you need to accept you are a loser.’ The tone is almost comforting, and she speaks as if she’s going to help you, but what she’s saying is brutal.”

Of course, while there’s endless free content on these Discord servers and subreddits, there are also several women who specialize in making this type of pornography. One of David’s favorite videos comes from a woman named MissWhip, who sells them on ManyVids for \$7 to \$200 each. In it, MissWhip angrily tells off the viewer for being an incel, saying that she has the cure. She tells the viewer to stop being bitter and angry, because they don’t deserve sex in the first place, and instructs them to repeat the mantra that they’re a “piece of shit” who will stay a virgin forever. They are to apologize to women for thinking they were ever entitled to sex.

On Clips4Sale, another site where adult creators can independently sell their work, virgin humiliation content like this has flourished in the past few years. “It was an incredibly obscure fetish for most of C4S’s history, but starting in early 2017 it started showing up on sales radar and then grew rapidly,” says Mike Stabile, a representative for the site. “In the past two years, sales have doubled or tripled, and searches are up something like 600 percent in the past year alone.”

The question is, of course, whether all of this is connected to the increasing sexlessness of our culture. Is the rise in virgin humiliation and beta fetishization a response to this decline, or is it potentially even partially responsible for it? Whatever

the answer, members of these online communities love to think their membership is growing.

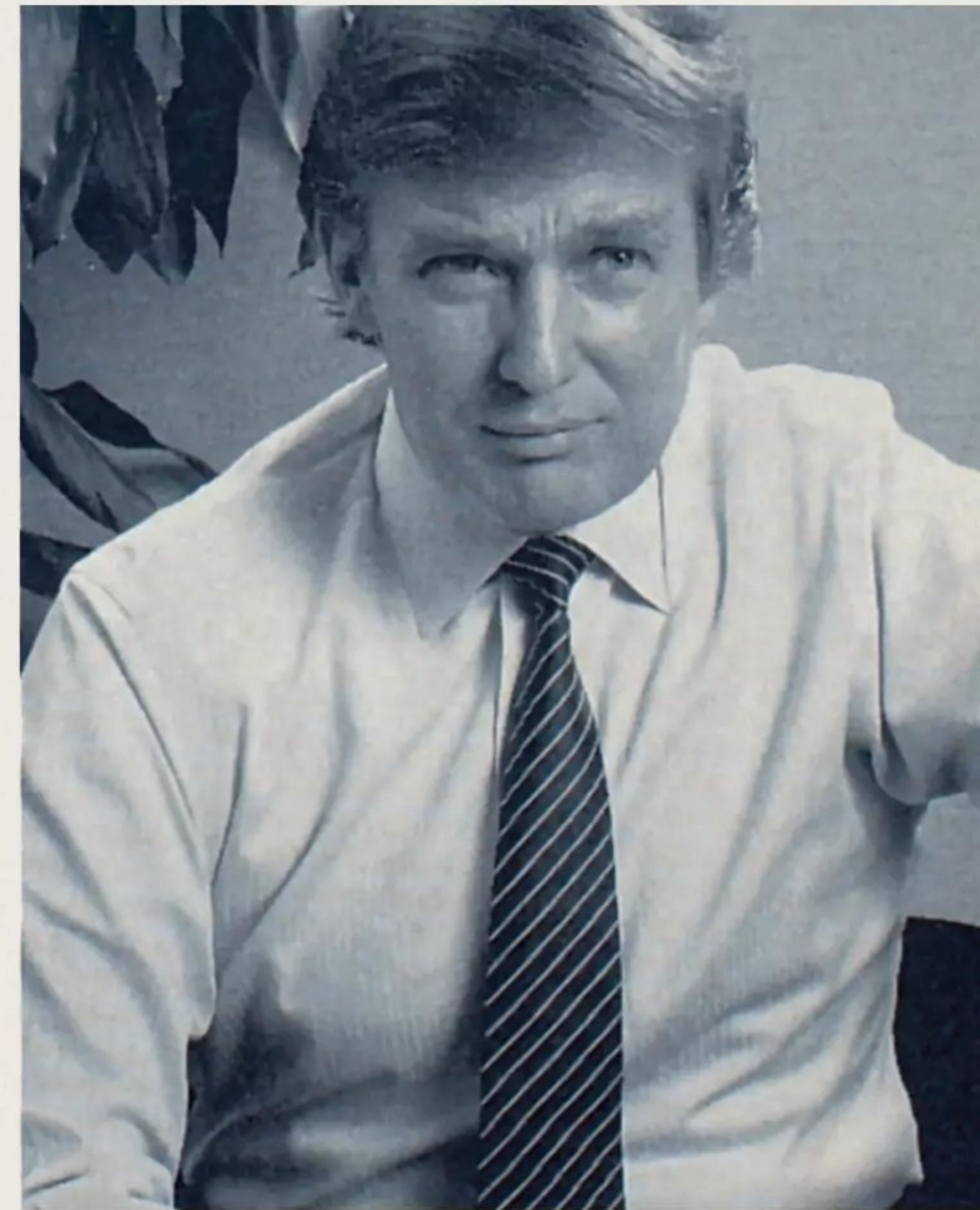
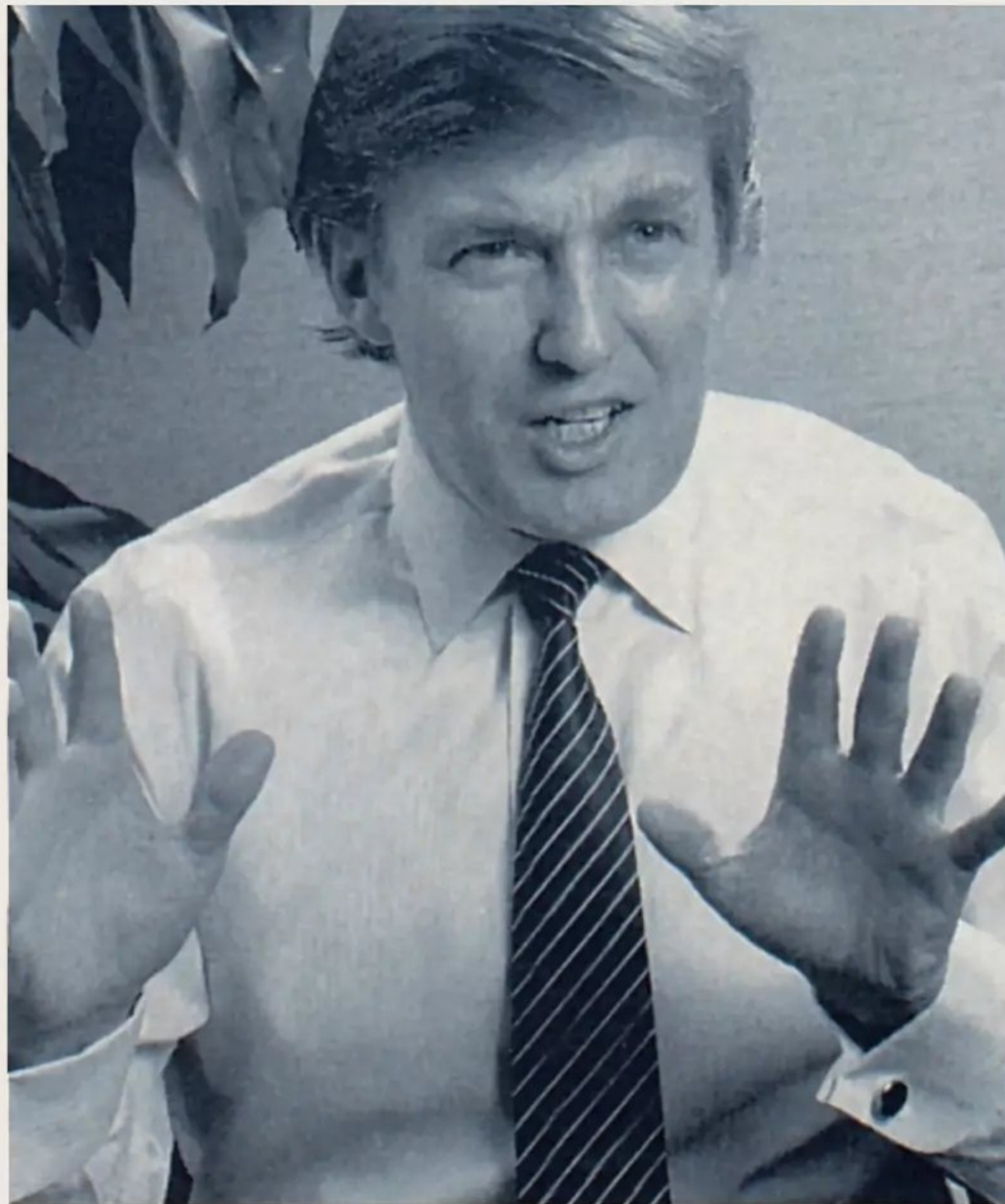
“It’s a big fantasy of mine, and of a lot of the guys I speak to, that beta men are being pushed out of dating and sex by higher barriers to entry, that the modern dating scene excludes unassertive, unconfident, shy, ugly, generally unattractive guys at a greater rate than before,” David says. “The implication of this is meant to be that adult male virginity is rising and that there’s perhaps something natural about this—that we’re returning to a more organic state of sexual competition, and beta males just have to embrace sexlessness and everything that comes with it as women have more freedom to choose.”

Bob, David, Jeremy, and their ilk suspect that there are countless societal reasons for the phenomenon they represent: Women are now financially, socially, and romantically more independent and have no obligation to settle for weird, porn-addicted men, dating apps have made meeting women all the more difficult and competitive, and cold-approaching women under these conditions seems downright hopeless.

“Once this is all established, we have no choice but to say that it’s a good thing,” David says. “Our emasculation and frustration is simply because there’s a level playing field now, because we can’t compete in conditions of equity, because women are free from patriarchal structures and norms that bound them to even undeserving men. So our adult virginity is a symptom of progress, because loser men can’t compete in a society based on competition without the enforced equality among men of past patriarchal institutions and norms.”

Whatever the value of this lofty interpretation, these men say that embracing virgin humiliation is, above all, a relief. They’ve spent years worrying, riddled with fear that it’s too late, wondering how they can ever rid themselves of their virginity but feeling too overwhelmed by the conditions around them to do anything but open Pornhub or Reddit. Until one day they stumble upon the right post, the right Discord server, the right dominatrix on X who tells them they’ve been looking at things all wrong. It’s not true that they have no sex life: Their virginity was their sex life all along. ♀

"EVERYTHING TO ME IS A



FROM THE ARCHIVE: A GLIMPSE INTO THE INNER LIFE OF DONALD TRUMP.

In February 1990, *Playboy* published the first of its two major interviews with then real estate developer Donald Trump, probably the most revealing he ever gave. It was a good time to be Donald Trump. His first book, *The Art of the Deal*, was a global bestseller. His reputation as a businessman and an empire builder wasn't yet dented by an overreliance on cheap financing. It would still be a few years before he'd become as famous for his sex life as for his business dealings. And many years before he was returned to the White House for a second term, hailed by half the nation as a savior of democracy and loathed by the other half as a democracy-snuffing dictator.

It's a stretch to say that this interview offers an unfiltered view of Trump, because Trump has never operated through

filters. But it does offer a snapshot of Trump becoming Trump, at the moment he ascended from a local figure to a national one. You can sense here a younger man coming into his own—not in terms of maturity, perhaps, but in terms of discovering and perfecting his public persona. He's hungry, rough around the edges. He seems like a real person. Maybe not the most well-adjusted person. But he's letting it all hang out.

In this first interview, conducted by Glenn Plaskin of the New York *Daily News*, he may not always be honest about the facts and he might fudge the numbers, but he doesn't disguise the magnitude of his desires or the intensity of his drives. He doesn't just want more. He wants everything. He doesn't just want to beat his enemies, he wants to crush

them. He doesn't actually care about possessions; it's all for show, he'd be just as happy living in a studio apartment. He fiercely denies he ever wants to be president—*unless America needs him*, which, he all but says, it inevitably will.

The original interview ran to almost 11,000 words, and much of it was concerned with his epic tabloid battles of the day—against then New York City Mayor Ed Koch and Trump's real estate rival Leona Helmsley, his first high-profile female antagonist (“a vicious, horrible woman”—the act was fully formed). We trimmed those parts away and focused on the man. What emerges is a portrait of the Donald Trump whose emotional volatility and mythic ambition would come to dominate the history of our time. Thirty-five years ago, he spelled it all out.

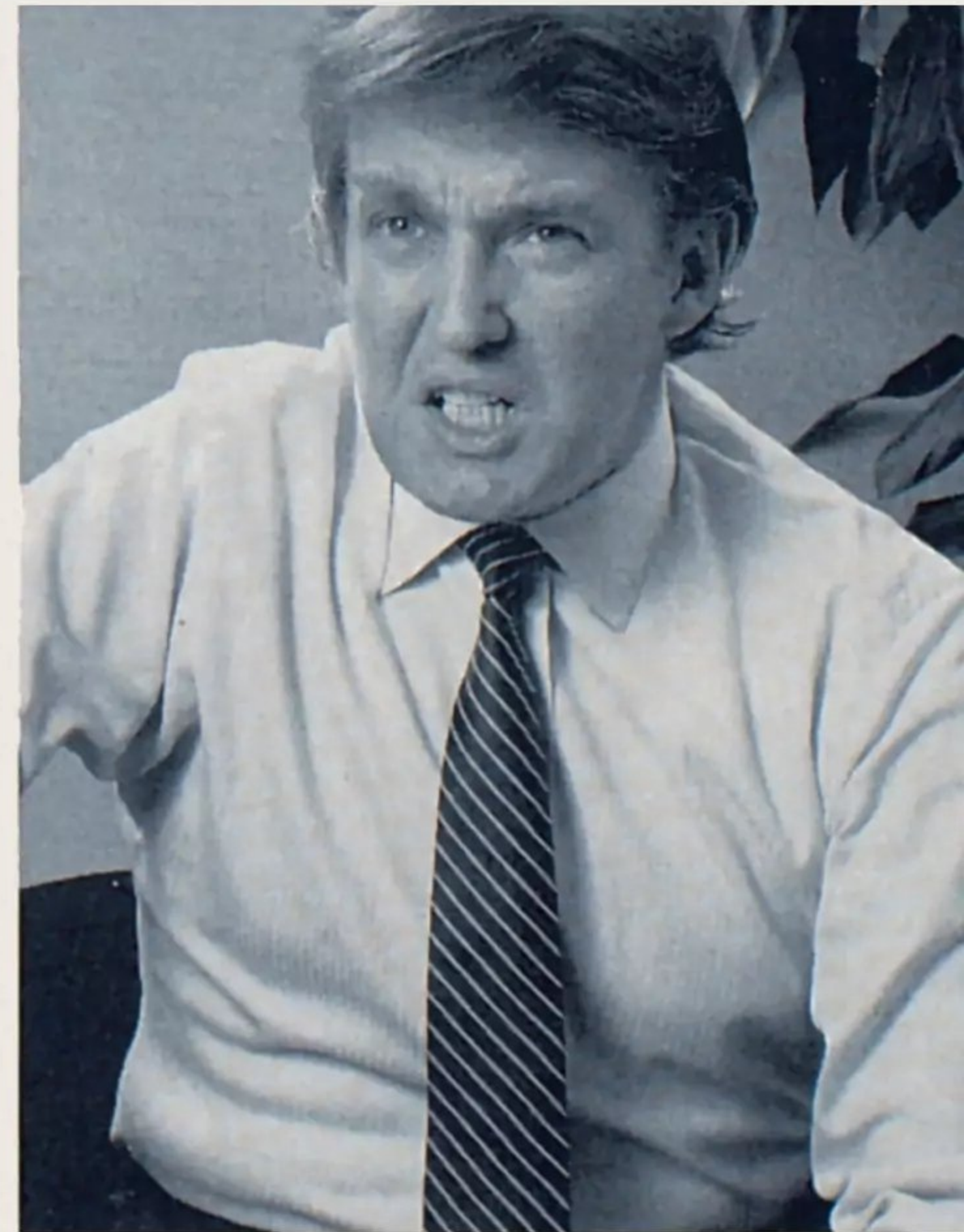
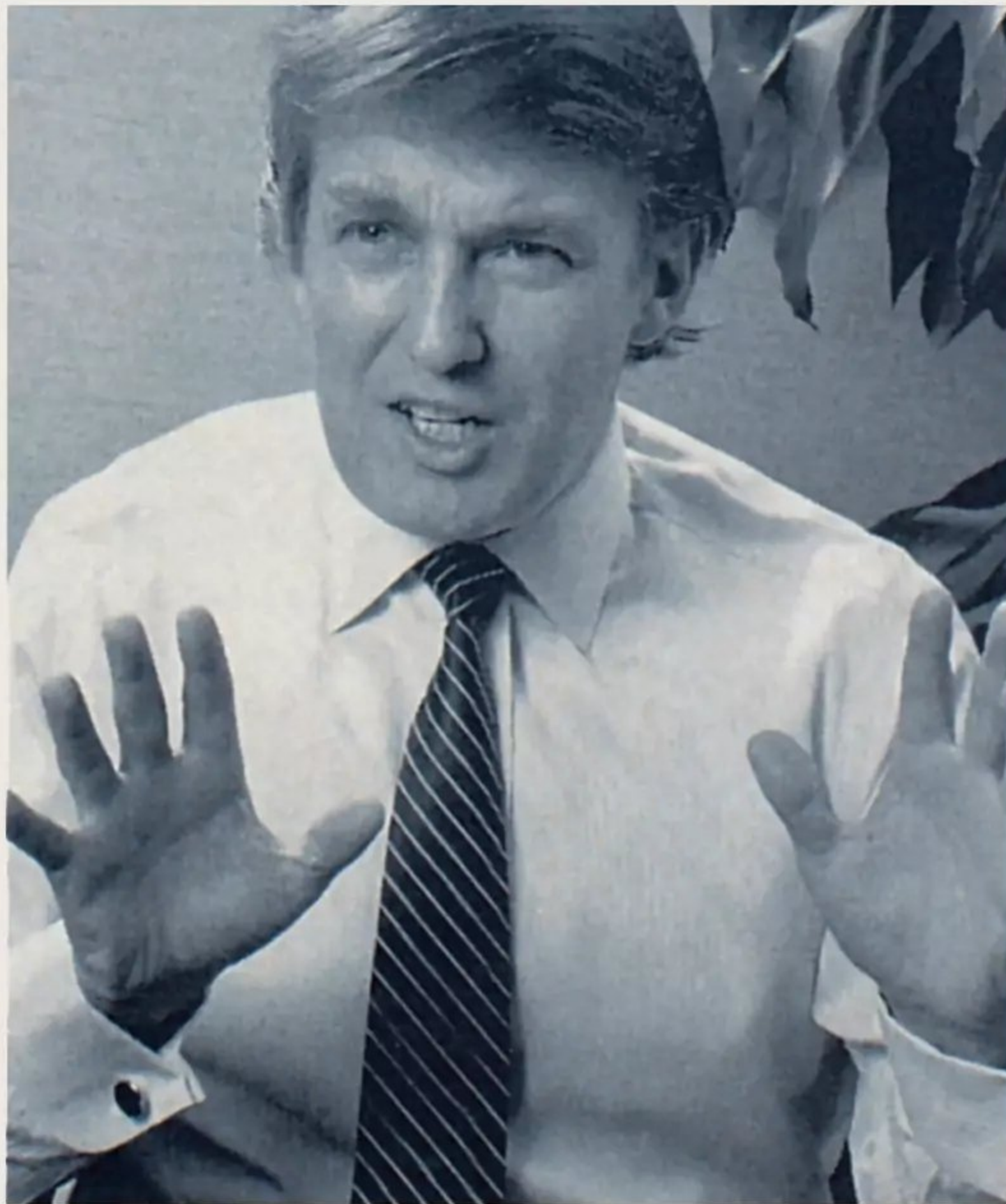
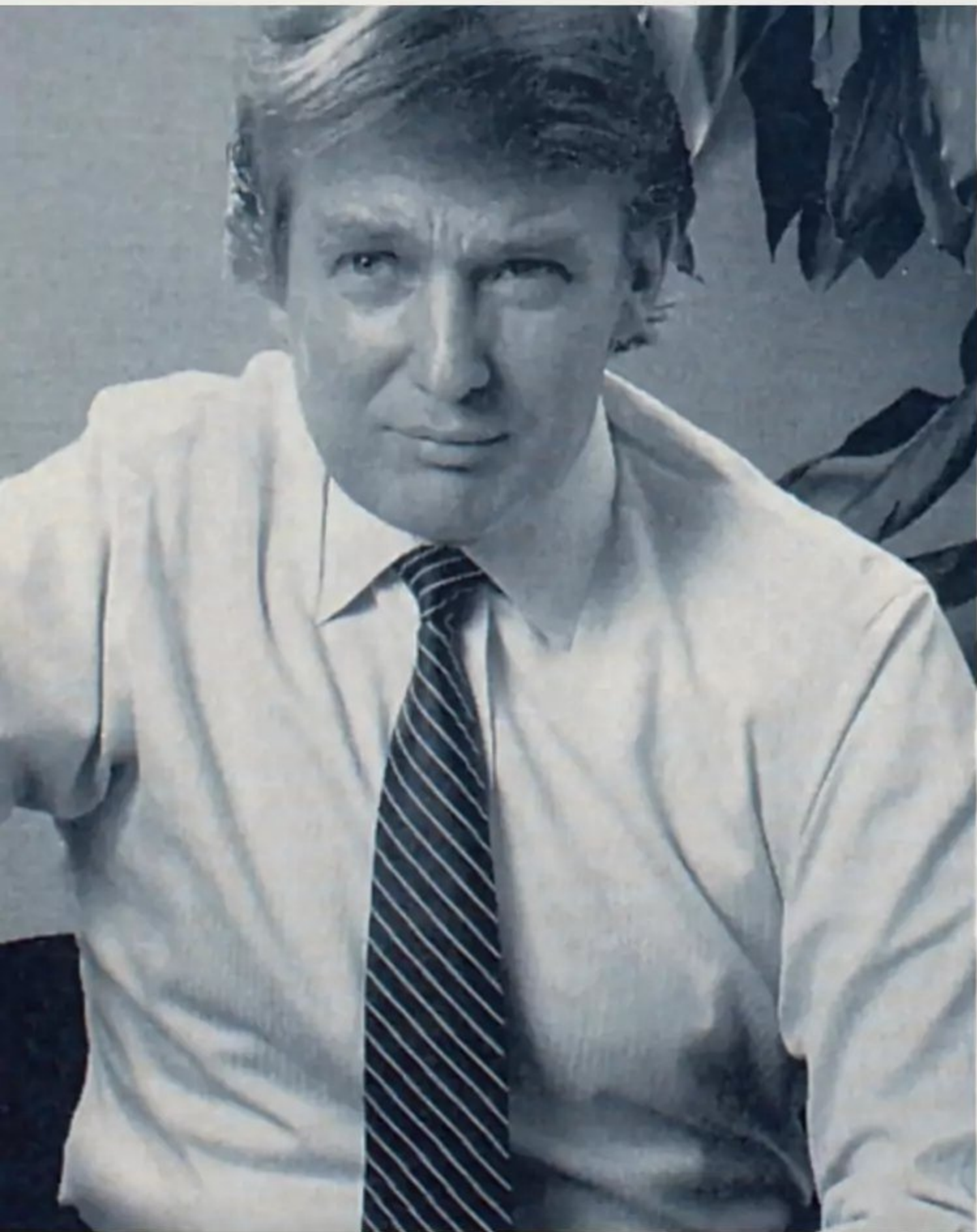
PLAYBOY: OK. But here we are at the start of a new decade. How do you respond when people call you ostentatious, ego-ridden, and a greedy symbol of the '80s?

TRUMP: Rich men are less likely to like me, but the working man likes me because he knows I worked hard and didn't inherit what I've built. Hey, I made it myself; I have a right to do what I want with it.

PLAYBOY: With so much poverty on the city streets, isn't it embarrassing for you to flaunt your wealth?

TRUMP: There has always been a display of wealth and always will be, until the depression comes, which it always does. And let me tell you, a display is a good thing. It shows people

PSYCHOLOGICAL GAME"



that you can be successful. It can show you a way of life. *Dynasty* did it on TV. It's very important that people aspire to be successful. The only way you can do it is if you look at somebody who is.

PLAYBOY: And for you, sitting snugly inside the 118 rooms of your Palm Beach mansion—

TRUMP: People understand that the house in Florida is business. I use it very seldom. I could be happy living in a studio apartment.

PLAYBOY: Oh, come on.

TRUMP: I mean it; the houses, the planes, and the boat are just investments. I paid \$29 million for the Khashoggi yacht; two years later, I'll be selling it for more than \$100 million and getting a bigger one.

PLAYBOY: What is it that attracts you to all this glitz?

TRUMP: I have glitzy casinos because people expect it. Glitz works in Atlantic City, and yet the Plaza Hotel has been brought back to its original elegance of 1907. So I don't use glitz in all cases. And in my residential buildings, I sometimes use flash, which is a level below glitz.

PLAYBOY: Then what does all this—the yacht, the bronze tower, the casinos—really mean to you?

TRUMP: Props for the show.

PLAYBOY: And what is the show?

TRUMP: The show is *Trump* and it is sold-out performances everywhere. I've had fun doing it and will continue to have fun, and I think most people enjoy it.

PLAYBOY: Do you think the ones who hate it are jealous?

TRUMP: They could be whatever—but the vast majority dig it.

PLAYBOY: What satisfaction, exactly, do you get out of doing a deal?

TRUMP: I love the creative process. I do what I do out of pure enjoyment. Hopefully, nobody does it better. There's a beauty to making a great deal. It's my canvas. And I like painting it.

I like the challenge and tell the story of the coal miner's son. The coal miner gets black-lung disease, his son gets it, then *his* son. If I had been the son of a coal miner, I would have left the damn mines.

But most people don't have the imagination—or whatever—to leave their mine. They don't have "it."

PLAYBOY: Which is?

TRUMP: "It" is an ability to become an entrepreneur, a great athlete, a great writer. You're either born with it or you're not. Ability can be honed, perfected, or neglected. The day Jack Nicklaus came into this world, he had more innate ability to play golf than anybody else.

PLAYBOY: You obviously have a lot of self-confidence. How do you use that in a business deal?

TRUMP: I believe in positive thinking, but I also believe in the power of negative thinking. You should prepare for the worst. If I'm doing a deal, I want to know how bad it's going to be if everything doesn't work rather than how good it's going to be.

I have a positive outlook, but I'm unfortunately also quite cynical. So if all the negatives

happened, what would my strategy be? Would I want to be in that position? If I don’t, I don’t do the deal. My attitude is to focus on the down side because the up side will always take care of itself. If a deal is going to be great, it’s just a question of “How much am I going to make?”

PLAYBOY: How far are you willing to push adversaries?

TRUMP: I will demand anything I can get. When you’re doing business, you take people to the brink of breaking them without having them break, to the maximum point their heads can handle—without breaking them. That’s the sign of a good businessman.

PLAYBOY: When you were growing up in Queens, your father was supposedly a harsh taskmaster. It has been theorized that your father instilled in you a great sense of inadequacy. True?

TRUMP: That’s 100 percent wrong. I was always very much accepted by my father. He adored Donald Trump and I’ve always known that. But I did want to prove to my father and other people that I had the ability to be successful on my own.

PLAYBOY: You’ve often said that your father made you work as a teenager and taught you the value of the buck.

TRUMP: My father never *made* me work. I liked to work during summers. I don’t understand these teenagers who sit home watching television all day. Where’s their appetite for competition? Working was in my genes.

PLAYBOY: Still, your father was one tough son of a bitch, wasn’t he?

TRUMP: He was a strong, strict father, a no-nonsense kind of

guy, but he didn’t hit me. It wasn’t what he’d ever say to us, either. He ruled by demeanor, not the sword. And he *never* scared or intimidated me.

PLAYBOY: Your older brother, Fred, who died from heart failure brought on by acute alcoholism, had a more difficult time with him, didn’t he?

TRUMP: Take one environment and it will work completely differently on different children. Our family environment, the competitiveness, was a negative for Fred.

It wasn’t easy for him being cast in a very tough environment, and I think it played havoc on him. I was very close to him and it was very sad when he died...toughest situation I’ve had....

“I DON’T WANT TO BE PRESIDENT. I’M 100 PERCENT SURE. I’D CHANGE MY MIND ONLY IF I SAW THIS COUNTRY CONTINUE TO GO DOWN THE TUBES.”

PLAYBOY: What did you learn from his experience?

TRUMP: *[Pauses]* Nobody has ever asked me that. But his death affected everything that has come after it.... I think constantly that I never really gave him thanks for it. He was the first Trump boy out there, and I subconsciously watched his moves.

PLAYBOY: And the lesson?

TRUMP: I saw people really taking *advantage* of Fred and the lesson I learned was *always to keep up my guard 100 percent*, whereas he didn’t. He didn’t feel that there was really reason for that, which is a fatal mistake in life. People are too trusting. I’m a very *untrusting*

guy. I study people all the time, automatically; it’s my way of life, for better or worse.

PLAYBOY: Why?

TRUMP: I am very skeptical about people; that’s self-preservation at work. I believe that, unfortunately, people are out for themselves. At this point, it’s to many people’s advantage to like me. Would the phone stop ringing, would these people kissing ass disappear if things were not going well? I enjoy testing friendship.... Everything in life to me is a psychological game, a series of challenges you either meet or don’t. I am always testing people who work for me.

You can never tell until you test; the human species is interesting in that way. So to me, friendship can be really tested only in bad times. I instinctively mistrust many people. It is not a negative in my life but a positive. *Playboy* wouldn’t be talking to me today if I weren’t a cynic.

So I learned that from Fred, and I owe him a lot.... He could have ultimately been a happy guy, but things just went the unhappy way.

PLAYBOY: How do you define toughness?

TRUMP: Tough is being mentally capable of winning battles against an opponent and doing it with a smile. Tough is winning systematically.

PLAYBOY: Sometimes you sound like a presidential candidate stirring up the voters.

TRUMP: I don’t want the presidency. I’m going to help a lot of people with my

foundation—and for me, the grass isn’t always greener.

PLAYBOY: But if the grass ever did look greener, which political party do you think you’d be more comfortable with?

TRUMP: Well, if I ever ran for office, I’d do better as a Democrat than as a Republican—and that’s not because I’d be more liberal, because I’m conservative. But the working guy would elect me. He likes me. When I walk down the street, those cabbies start yelling out their windows.

PLAYBOY: Do you think George Bush [George H.W. Bush, the president in 1990] is soft?

TRUMP: I like George Bush very much and support him and always will. But I disagree with him when he talks of a kinder, gentler America. I think if this country gets any kinder or gentler, it’s literally going to cease to exist. I think if we had people from the business community—the Carl Icahns, the Ross Perots—negotiating some of our foreign policy, we’d have respect around the world.

PLAYBOY: What would be some of President Trump’s longer-term views of the future?

TRUMP: I think of the future, but I refuse to paint it. Anything can happen. But I often think of nuclear war.

PLAYBOY: Nuclear war?

TRUMP: I’ve always thought about the issue of nuclear war; it’s a very important element in my thought process. It’s the ultimate, the ultimate catastrophe, the biggest problem this world has, and nobody’s focusing on the nuts and bolts of it. It’s a little like sickness. People don’t believe

they’re going to get sick until they do. Nobody wants to talk about it. The bomb Harry Truman dropped on Hiroshima was a toy next to today’s.

We have thousands of weapons pointed at us and nobody even knows if they’re going to go in the right direction. They’ve never really been tested. These jerks in charge don’t know how to paint a wall, and we’re relying on them to shoot nuclear missiles to Moscow.

It’s a total mess.

PLAYBOY: And how would President Trump handle it?

TRUMP: He would believe very strongly in extreme military strength. He wouldn’t trust anyone. He wouldn’t trust the Russians; he wouldn’t trust our allies; he’d have a huge military arsenal, perfect it, understand it. Part of the problem is that we’re defending some of the wealthiest countries in the world for nothing.... We’re being laughed at around the world, defending Japan—

PLAYBOY: Wait. If you believe that the public shares these views, and that you could do the job, why not consider running for president?

TRUMP: I’d do the job as well as or better than anyone else. It’s my hope that George Bush can do a great job.

PLAYBOY: You categorically don’t want to be president?

TRUMP: I don’t want to be President. I’m 100 percent sure. I’d change my mind only if I saw this country continue to go down the tubes.

PLAYBOY: What is marriage to you? Is it monogamous?

TRUMP: I don’t have to answer that. I never speak about my wife—which is one of

the advantages of not being a politician. My marriage is and should be a personal thing.

PLAYBOY: But you do enjoy flirtations?

TRUMP: I think any man enjoys flirtations, and if he said he didn’t, he’d be lying or he’d be a politician trying to get the extra four votes. I think everybody likes knowing he’s well responded to. Especially as you get into certain strata where there is an ego involved and a high level of success, it’s important. People really like the idea that other people respond well to them.

PLAYBOY: You’re involved in so many activities, deals, promotions—in the deep of the night, after the reporters all leave your conferences, are you ever satisfied with what you’ve accomplished?

TRUMP: I’m too superstitious to be satisfied. I don’t dwell on the past. People who do that go right down the tubes. I’m never self-satisfied. Life is what you do while you’re waiting to die. You know, it is all a rather sad situation.

PLAYBOY: Life? Or death?

TRUMP: Both. We’re here and we live our 60, 70, or 80 years and we’re gone. You win, you win, and in the end, it doesn’t mean a hell of a lot. But it is something to do—to keep you interested.

PLAYBOY: Do you agree with the T-shirt that says WHOEVER HAS THE MOST TOYS WINS?

TRUMP: Depends on your definition of winning. Some of my friends are unbelievably successful and miserable people. I truly believe that someone successful is never really happy, because dissatisfaction is what drives him. I’ve never met a

“I HAVE GLITZY CASINOS BECAUSE PEOPLE EXPECT IT. [BUT] I DON’T USE GLITZ IN ALL CASES. I SOMETIMES USE FLASH, WHICH IS A LEVEL BELOW GLITZ.”

successful person who wasn’t neurotic. It’s not a terrible thing...it’s controlled neuroses.

PLAYBOY: What do you mean?

TRUMP: Controlled neuroses means having a tremendous energy level, an abundance of discontent that often isn’t visible. It’s also not oversleeping. I don’t sleep more than four hours a night. I have friends who need 12 hours a night and I tell them they’re at a major disadvantage in terms of playing the game.

PLAYBOY: You mentioned that you have to be born with “it.” Do you suppose your children inherited “it” from you?

TRUMP: Statistically, my children have a very bad shot. Children of successful people are generally very, very troubled, not successful.

PLAYBOY: Do you think they will have to make it?

TRUMP: I would love them to be in business with me, but 95 percent of those children fail in a sophisticated big business. It takes confidence, intelligence, shtick. If any one of these traits is missing, you’re not going to make it.

PLAYBOY: When you think about role models from history, what figures particularly inspired you?

TRUMP: I could say Winston Churchill, but...I’ve always thought that Louis B. Mayer led the ultimate life. The ultimate job for me would have been running MGM in the ’30s and ’40s—pre-television.

There was incredible glamour and style in those days that’s gone now. And that’s when you could control situations. In those days, when your great actor was an alcoholic, and nobody ever found out—that was having tremendous control over things, which would be impossible today.

PLAYBOY: You seem very pleasant and charming during interviews, yet you talk constantly about toughness. Do you put on an act for us?

TRUMP: I think everybody has to have some kind of filtering system. I’m very fair and I have had the same people working for me for years. But when somebody tries to sucker-punch me, when they’re after my ass, I push back a hell of a lot harder than I was pushed in the first place. If somebody tries to push me around, he’s going to pay a price. Those people don’t come back for seconds. I don’t like being pushed around or taken advantage of. And that’s one of the problems with our country today. This country is being pushed around by everyone—

PLAYBOY: About your own toughness...

TRUMP: Well, as I said, I study people and in every negotiation, I weigh how tough I should appear. I can be a killer and a nice guy. You have to be everything. You have to be strong. You have to be sweet. You have to be ruthless. And I don’t think any of it can be learned. Either you have it or you don’t. And that is why most kids can get straight A’s in school but fail in life. ♡

“MEET YOUR 2025 CLASS OF PLAYBOY BUNNIES”



THE FIRST NINE
members of
Playboy's 2025
Class of Bunnies
took Miami Basel
by storm in
December.
They are, from
left to right,
Jessika Kolosovas,
Mariel Alexandra
(standing), Mollie
Gould, Na'Jear
(standing),
Kitty Wan, Taylor
Gallo (standing),
Nafeesah "Fosh"
Terry, Mallory
Mariem (standing),
and Alexandria
Finley. Go follow
them on Instagram.
Better yet, come
meet them at one
of Playboy's many
events in 2025.

BUNNIES TAKE MIAMI BEACH



SATAN'S LITTLE HELPER

THE SATANIC TEMPLE MADE ITS NAME ANTAGONIZING THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT. THEN IT OPENED AN ABORTION CLINIC NAMED FOR SAMUEL ALITO'S MOM, AND THINGS GOT UGLY.
BY MOLLY LANGMUIR

ABOVE: Objects on display at the Satanic Temple's headquarters. They include a bronze statue of the occult deity Baphomet (second from right), with the head and legs of a goat and the body of a human, and a vintage iron chastity belt (far right).

ONE MORNING IN late October, Lucien Greaves, the spokesperson for the Satanic Temple, stood with his guard dog, Luci, outside the organization's headquarters, a Victorian mansion in Salem, Massachusetts. Luci, a canine mass of muscle with such enormous ears that Greaves would soon dress her as a bat for Halloween, eyed the surroundings warily. "She's on alert for everybody," Greaves said. Behind us, a family headed inside the mansion to visit its museum, which contains, among other occult artifacts, a sculpture of the goat-headed deity Baphomet large enough for people to sit in its lap for selfies. Visitors often ask to take photos with Greaves as well. "In this place, I'm fucking Mickey Mouse," he said.

Greaves, the most visible and influential Satanist in the country, is also frequently the subject of death threats. He has spent the past decade as the face of the Satanic Temple, a group he co-founded to promote religious pluralism and rational thought—and to mercilessly antagonize the religious right. One of TST's first actions, in 2013, was a "pink mass" performed over the grave of the mother of Fred Phelps, founder of the virulently homophobic Westboro Baptist Church. The mass included two men kissing while Greaves presided in a horned headdress, then draped his scrotum along the headstone. The next year, after a monument to the Ten Commandments was installed at the Oklahoma State Capitol, TST commissioned a nine-foot bronze sculpture of Baphomet. (Before it could be erected, a

state court ordered the Christian monument removed.) This past December, after an Ohio school began offering periods of Bible study during lunch and recess, TST countered by offering its own "religious release program," which involves taking students to a local library to learn about subjects like zoology.

The group also fervently supports abortion rights—one of its fundamental tenets is that a person's body is subject to their will alone. In 2023, in New Mexico, it opened a telehealth service named Samuel Alito's Mom's Satanic Abortion Clinic, after the ultraconservative Supreme Court justice. (Another central belief of TST is that engaging in serious missions shouldn't require setting aside one's sense of humor.) In October 2024, they opened a second clinic, in Virginia, with the relatively staid name Right to Your Life Satanic Abortion Clinic. While these are small operations, they perform the same functions as any other telehealth abortion clinic, providing virtual consultations and connecting patients with pharmacies that mail them abortion pills. A few things do set their services apart, however. Both clinics are fully funded by donations—patients pay the pharmacy for their medication but send nothing to TST. As part of the service, patients are also told about an optional "religious abortion ritual" wherein they look at themselves in the mirror and recite, "By my body, my blood, by my will, it is done."

TST, in other words, is a sort of right-wing fever dream. But it's also the opposite



of pop culture's depiction of Satanists as murderous devil worshippers. TST members do not revere Satan or even believe he is real. Instead, their view of Satan is that of the character reimagined in Romantic literature as a complex figure who fought abusive power and served as a voice of reason. (This is in line with how Satan was initially presented in the Old Testament—the Hebrew term that was often originally used to refer to Satan simply means “the Adversary.”) TST's website says the group's mission includes “encouraging benevolence, rejecting tyranny and pursuing noble goals.” They see in Baphomet not the devil but a representation of duality.

Harvard Law School professor Noah Feldman argues that James Madison, known as the father of the Constitution, would have backed TST's fight for religious pluralism because the framers wrote the First Amendment to apply to all groups, no matter how contestable. “We don't have any examples of people in constitutional discourse saying, at the time, ‘Well, not them,’” he says.

Meanwhile, detractors have deemed TST “troll lords” and “Satan personified,” and any number of people who legitimately believe the group is evil have been drawn to its headquarters. Some of these visits have been innocuous, as when a group of women tried to douse the building with holy oil. But there was also the time a man showed up in a T-shirt that read “GOD” and tried to set the building on fire and an incident last May when a guy threw a pipe bomb at the porch (it

failed to fully explode).

The cops suggested Greaves get a gun or a dog. He chose Luci, whose presence helped him feel more secure, but only slightly. “I don't want to assume I'm not going to get got,” he said. Just a few nights earlier, a man had attempted to break in while ranting that he had “four tons of TNT up in this bitch” and was himself Baphomet. When I expressed bewilderment, Greaves suggested that trying to make sense of it was beside the point. “I think you haven't dealt with the deluded long enough,” he said.

AFTER GREAVES AND I gave Luci a walk, we headed up a creaky staircase in the headquarters to a room on the second floor with blue velvet curtains covering the windows. Greaves, who has pale skin, two different-colored eyes, and a cerebral magnetism, settled into an office chair, Luci at his feet, and proved willing to talk about anything but himself. He's intensely private, which partly has to do with safety concerns but also reflects a philosophical position. “Everything seems to become some asshole's personal tale,” he said. “People should learn to be interested in ideas.”

Greaves, who's in his late 40s and was raised in suburban Detroit, did offer that growing up in the '80s, he'd been affected by watching the misdirected mania of the Satanic panic, when conspiracy theories about devil-worshipping cults led to scores of criminal prosecutions. “To find out that was horseshit?” he said. “That put the whole Satanic narrative in a

whole new context for me.”

By the early 2010s, Greaves had moved to Boston. He will neither confirm nor deny that he was a student at Harvard, but at a party at the university's Faculty Club he met Malcolm Jarry, a filmmaker with a provocative sense of humor. (“Greaves” and “Jarry” are “satonyms,” as are the names of all other TST members in this piece; each has tried in recent years to keep their legal name out of the press, concerned about threats.) Jarry had previously hit on the idea of using a Satanic group as a poison pill in the debate over the separation of church and state—the hope was that if evangelicals realized introducing religion into places like public schools meant opening the door to creeds they found objectionable, they'd retreat—but he didn't know much about Satanism. Greaves, by contrast, had become sympathetic with some of the movement's ideas, particularly its emphasis on rational thought. (The Church of Satan, a nontheistic religion formed in 1966 by Anton LaVey, was the first group to declare itself Satanic. Previously, “Satanism” had simply been a term Christians used to denigrate groups or practices they didn't like.)

When Jarry began actually trying to build a Satanic group, he hired Greaves as a consultant. And while Greaves initially planned to stay in the background, believing that declaring himself a Satanist would be suicidal, once events like the “pink mass” drew media attention he stepped in as the group's spokesperson. Soon others expressed

W H E N E V E R Y D R O P I S A M A T T E R O F S U R V I V A L



NO DAYS OFF PREMIUM WATER PROUDLY PRESENTS THE OFFICIAL PREMIUM WATER OF THE MIAMI HEAT & KASEYA CENTER

DIRECTED BY NDO H₂O PRODUCED BY 7 STEP REVERSE OSMOSIS STARRING STILL & SPARKLING IN BOTH 16 & 8.4 OUNCE CANS

SPECIAL EFFECTS BY 3 ESSENTIAL MINERALS: POTASSIUM, CALCIUM & MAGNESIUM FEATURING A GUARANTEED PFA FREE DESIGN



NO DAYS OFF IS NEVER TAKING A DAY OFF ON YOU. IT'S A COMMITMENT TO BECOMING YOUR BEST SELF.



interest in joining. TST sent out membership cards. “And then you have to make good on the whole thing,” Greaves said. (Jarry continues to run the group with Greaves but rarely speaks to the press.)

“It’s that whole idea of build it and they’ll come,” says Kapro Scious, a former pagan turned TST minister in central California. “They built it and they came.” Today TST has 700,000 members, IRS designation as a 501(c)(3) religious organization, and enough schisms to rival the early Christian church. (Among the reasons for the schisms is that the group doesn’t release any financial information. Significant criticism has also been directed at Greaves, who has occasionally apologized for past actions but regards much of the recent reproval as leftist overreach.)

TST, which Scious describes as an “assembly of solitaires,” inevitably means different things to different members. For some, it’s just a group to which they send a monthly donation of \$6.66. Many are also drawn to the group’s political efforts. “We are provocative, and we have a great sense of humor,” says Helian, TST’s executive director. “But we take the work seriously. A lot of us think we’re doing our patriotic duty.” Then there are hundreds of Satanists who gather in communities that provide the basic functions of a church, albeit one populated by unorthodox thinkers who distrust authority.

“We’ve all been the adversary, even as atheists,” says Bex Satanus, a minister who leads the Washington state congregation. “Christian culture is just so pervasive.” This is why they use “satonyms” regarding anything to do with TST, even when talking to each other in public. “People lose jobs, family members get upset,” Satanus says. “It offers a little bit of protection.” But she still thinks religious freedom is better than it used to be. One of her ancestors, she explains, was one of the Salem witches, accused of worshipping the devil despite being a devout Christian. “And in this century, I can be a Satanist and at this moment nobody is going to hang me,” she says. “It worked. Mostly. For now.”

A decade at the head of TST has made Greaves intimately familiar with the particular strain of American derangement that runs from the witch trials through the Satanic panic to the present. And it has come at a personal cost. Greaves declined to discuss whether he had a partner but did say he has long assumed having children will not be possible. “I just think it would be terrible for the kid,” he said. He rarely invites friends over and about the only time he goes out in a crowd anymore is when he performs with his band, Satanic Panic. But TST has also given Greaves

“WE ARE PROVOCATIVE, AND WE HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR,” SAYS HELIAN, TST’S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR. “BUT WE TAKE THE WORK SERIOUSLY. A LOT OF US THINK WE’RE DOING OUR PATRIOTIC DUTY.”



The Satanic Temple’s headquarters, an old Victorian house in Salem, Massachusetts. **BOTTOM:** Co-founder Lucien Greaves.

plenty of opportunity to grapple with the questions that most engage him. How much do we actually believe what we claim, about our values, about God and the devil, about religious pluralism as a central part of the American project? And how far can any of these things be twisted or stretched until they break?

ON ELECTION NIGHT, after Trump’s victory speech at Mar-a-Lago headquarters in Palm Beach, Florida, a group of Christians at the club broke into the spiritual hymn “How Great Thou Art,” singing in perfect harmony. It was confirmation of a reality Jarry and Greaves had long feared: Christian nationalism was an ascendant political force.

When I speak to Helian the next week, she says TST’s two telehealth clinics received an immediate burst of abortion pill requests. “Normally, we get a few a day,” she says.

“After the election, we got 48 over a period of hours.” Many came from women who weren’t pregnant but hoped to stock up in case the laws changed. The clinics hadn’t previously served nonpregnant patients in this way, but Helian, Greaves, and Jarry decided to start doing so. “I’m pissed off,” Helian says. “That’s the way we all feel. But we also feel reinvigorated.”

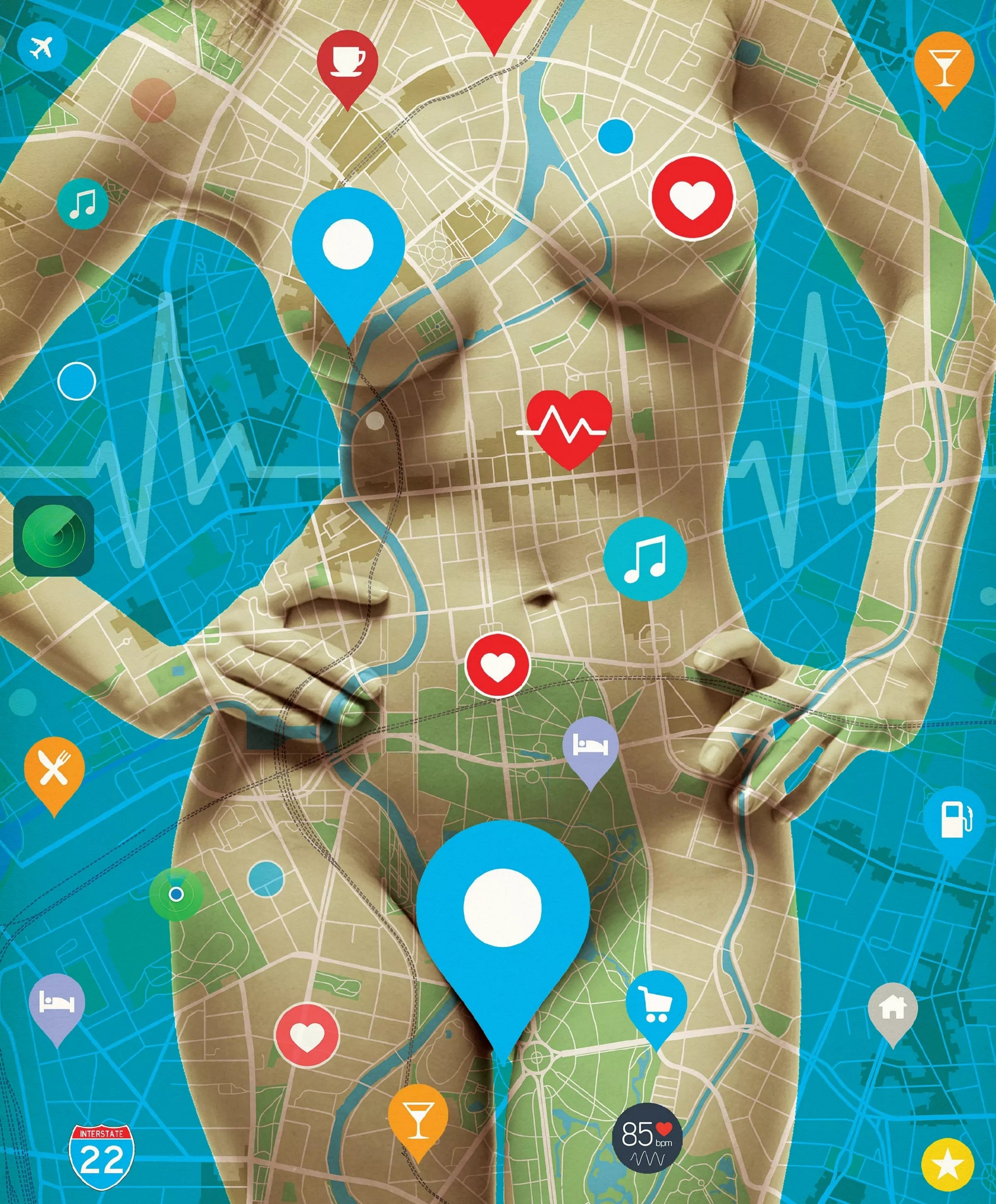
Greaves, for his part, sees the election as a chance to reaffirm his values. “We have an obligation to act openly, decisively, meaningfully, with optimal strategic consideration, and to have as much fun as we can doing it,” he wrote on his Substack. “We should imagine a future in which Satanists look back to us and say, I wish I could have been there in that time.”

He also told me he fantasizes about dropping out of his life and pursuing a more anonymous existence. He wasn’t sure how he’d support himself: He draws no income from TST, he said, but he does make money from his Substack and Patreon, and readership might drop if he weren’t connected to the group. But maybe he could focus on Satanic Panic, which is about to release a second album.

Usually, their gigs are at music venues, but in September 2023 they played at the Indiana State Capitol, in Indianapolis. After an evangelical rocker put on a worship service the previous May, TST was granted permission to have Satanic Panic do so as well.

The space was ornate, with soaring ceilings and wide marble columns. “Welcome to this celebration of Satan at the Indiana State Capitol!” Greaves began, a cello droning behind him. For the next 20 minutes, the band—heads draped in black hoods and amps covered in black-and-white flags with pentagrams—played its mix of doom, industrial, and “evil exotica” to a crowd that included enthusiastic supporters, curious onlookers, and a man who spent the whole time yelling.

Right behind Greaves stood an American flag, its colors bright and vivid against the beige of the columns and the black of the performers. As is often the case with TST, the scene could be read any number of ways. From one perspective, there was America, besieged by Satan. From another, there was a nation, polarized and pulsing with an undercurrent of violence, but operating, that afternoon at least, as its founders intended. ♫





CHEATING IN THE AGE OF THE EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS-ON SURVEILLANCE STATE. **BY LAUREN BANS**

“

FIGURED OUT MY EX-HUSBAND WAS CHEATING

on me through Strava,” Meg says, unpeeling a banana. In the TikTok, she’s making banana bread as she tells the tale. Strava, if you’re not aware, is a social fitness-tracker app. You sync your phone, your Apple Watch, your Fitbit, your 1994 shoelace pedometer, whatever, and share workouts for your friends to see and applaud.

Or at least that’s the intended use. The app also has a map component, which Meg points out as she vigorously mashes the banana in the bowl with a fork. Followers on Strava can see the exact path of your run. ▶ Deep into her marriage, Meg’s husband—whom she refers to in the multipart TikTok saga as “that little weasel”—asked her for a trial separation. First she was blindsided. Then suspicious. “Immediately, I start becoming, like, an FBI detective,” she says, scooping brown sugar into a measuring cup. “What can I go through to figure out what’s going on?” Like most men who are cheating, she says, That Little Weasel thought he was sly and covering his tracks. He was almost right. ▶ Meg downloaded his Facebook history, pored through his Instagram—there was evidence of sketchy behavior, but nothing undeniable. “If you’re a girl and you’ve been in this situation before, you know you just go in,” she says. “You find everything possible to get yourself answers.” Which is how Meg found herself analyzing her husband’s Strava running maps. Something was weird there. She remembered times when she offered to go on runs with him and he’d make up an excuse: “He was going to run too far for me, or I wouldn’t be able to keep up.” Looking at the map, Meg realized her husband had always run the same one-mile loop. It started at their house and proceeded directly to...another house. Turns out the “other woman” lived half a mile away. Meg ends the video with a joke: “Strava, if you’re looking to give out sponsorships, I know the ins and outs of your app.”

We’re all tracking and being tracked, voluntarily or not, all the time. The nearly sentient rectangle in our pocket is feeding us ads and suggestions (“turn right ahead, past the Burger King”) based on our online history and geographic location. We can see the inner workings of our bodies—heart rate, glucose level, daily calorie burn—from a watch on our wrist or a suspiciously shiny ring. A music app tells us what new album we’d like and what shows to buy tickets for based on the songs we have on repeat. If life is a quest to know oneself, we now have a gazillion tools offering us a metaphorical hammer to crack that nut. Plato’s cave? Surely there’s an app that can turn on a light in that place. Information is ours for the taking—for better or for worse. The flip side? Our information is the world’s for the taking. Maybe you lingered on a sweater at Gap.com but ultimately didn’t purchase it. Here it is again, in a banner ad in the *New York Times*. Oh hey, nice to see you back on Pornhub! You like girl-on-girl stuff in the shower, yes? Voilà. Did your coworker make you try his “here’s what you’d look like as a baby” app? Oops, China has a scan of your face now. I’m sure they’re just using it for... tourism purposes or something. There are almost 2,000 comments under Meg’s TikTok. The most common phrase? “I found out through...” At least five other commenters also found out their partner was cheating through Strava. But the list gets so absurd, it’s almost comical. Think of an app, and it’s on the “I found out through” list: Snapchat, Doordash, Spotify, Fetch, X, Uber, LinkedIn, Verizon, Discord, Venmo. They’ve all helped confirm marital suspicions. There’s an *I found out through Netflix* “because someone was binging *Gossip Girl*...,” and an *I found out through the Walgreens App* “because he bought a card, bottle of wine, and perfume using my rewards number.” Even a *My uncle found out his ex was cheating through a Bible app*. One of the later comments on Meg’s post reads: “I found out a guy was cheating on me through Pokemon Go.”

Nadia Essex, a self-described “dating guru” who was on the British series *Celebs Go Dating*, also took to TikTok for her reveal. Her boyfriend was out late with the boys one night, and she woke up early to make him breakfast, only to get a notification on Fitbit—“the Fitbit that we’d synced together,” she points out—congratulating her now-ex for hitting a new milestone in the middle of the night. “Between 2 o’clock and three o’clock in the morning, he had burned over 500 calories,” Essex says. She takes a long pause, glances sideways, then: “I shoved that breakfast where the sun don’t shine.”



Then there's Louisa Melcher (loulouorange on TikTok). She spotted her fiancé's infidelity thanks to Spotify. Early on in their relationship, her fiancé played what she called a "really weird, really esoteric" R&B track while they were making out. Melcher asked what it was (she was not a fan) and her boyfriend told her it was a song his ex-girlfriend loved listening to when they were getting intimate. (Which, let us all agree, is not a genius move.) But lesson learned. No more song. Cut to 18 months later, and Spotify Wrapped comes out. The song is No. 1 on her fiancé's most-played. "So either we've been thinking about the ex a lot, or we've been playing it every time we get with said ex," Melcher says. She decided to confront him and accuse him of the latter...which turned out to be true. The caption on her post reads: "If only Spotify Wrapped had dropped 6 days earlier, I could have saved \$15k on my wedding venue deposit."

Here's the irony: Our interconnected world used to be a goddamned paradise for cheaters. The phrase "she slid into my DMs" caught on for a reason. Social media opened up myriad new, enticing ways to facilitate cheating. Care to "reconnect" on Facebook with that girl with the cute freckles from high school? Hey, what if this bikini model's messages are open? There are dating apps to lie on or even affair apps, like Ashley Madison, if you don't feel like lying, at least to your affair partner. Now the tables have been turned, and it might be the worst time in history to be a cheater. Assuming you don't secretly want to get caught.

Instagram, Tiktok, even X (né Twitter) have become the interwebs' First Wives Club—replete with cautionary tales of the cheated-upon and a warning to others out there to check in with both their gut and his apps. You can find instructionals for women on how to put a tracker on his car. How-tos on where to search on his computer for evidence. And that's only necessary if he's savvy enough to disable his Find My phone tracker in the first place. (If he does, there's the reasonable follow-up: "Why is your Find My off?") Meg, the one whose husband was caught straying thanks to Strava, keeps her story up top as her pinned post. She's done at least 30 videos on her husband's infidelity, their marriage, the warning signs, etc. It's basically her online brand. She says at the start of one of her many posts: "This story is for you, this story is for your sister, your mother, your best friend."

There's nothing wrong with the sisterhood looking out for one another. Most people, except maybe JD Vance, would call it an inherent good. But more questionable



THINK OF AN APP...SNAPCHAT, DOORDASH, SPOTIFY, FETCH, TWITTER, UBER, LINKEDIN, VERIZON, DISCORD, VENMO. THEY'VE ALL HELPED CONFIRM MARITAL SUSPICIONS.

versions of "looking out" have begun to crop up too, and the state of relationships is starting to feel like post-Patriot Act America. This summer a woman on TikTok went viral for recording a man on a plane allegedly cheating with a random woman. In the video the man and woman lean in close and talk animatedly. At one point he lifts his shirt to show her the tattoo on his back. The post's caption: "If this man is your husband flying @United Airlines, flight 2140, from Houston to New York, he's probably going to be staying with Katy tonight." If you see something, say something, indeed.

Within 24 hours, the man was identified—"that's my second cousin by marriage!"—and his, his wife's, and Katy's information was shared online for the public to dissect. Users offered up their amateur expertise, positing that the wife was way more beautiful than Katy, so why would he cheat on her? As we didn't all learn from Christie Brinkley and Billy Joel, that's not how it works—and comparing two women's relative beauty isn't exactly a feminist victory. The woman who posted the original video was praised for doing "God's work." Soon after, more vigilante-style posts went viral with captions like: "Hey, if your husband's name is Jake and he's at Cantina Bonita he just took off his wedding ring to go talk to a redhead at the bar." Or: "Sorry to whoever is dating Ben in the striped shirt at Club Inferno! He's fingering a girl in the bathroom." The good feelings have eroded. It feels much less like women looking out for other women and much more like people auditioning for TMZ or @DeuxMoi.

You may be thinking, "Well, just don't cheat, and your secret DoorDash history won't make your girlfriend dash out the door." Which is true, in theory. But what's all this doing to dating and courtship in general? The vibes, to sound younger than I am, are dismal right now. If I may speak personally: Heterosexual woman here. Generally into monogamy. (A moment of silence for my lot in life, please.) On any given night my Tiktok, should I open it, feeds me six videos of crying girls in their 20s who were ghosted, three women recounting dates from hell, another lady or two who just found out her husband was cheating, and maybe one more confronting her ex's mistress. It's like, OK, OK, I get it! Sure, men suck. A lot of the time. Maybe even most of the time. (Sorry, readers!) But also? Hearing about it incessantly may be starting to affect the energy women are bringing to the table, or bar counter, or café that has a bunch of cats for some reason. It's hard to get it up for, say, Sam, the 39-year-old data entry specialist from Hinge when your brain has been bombarded nightly with the bad deeds of man, which sounds like an Ingmar Bergman movie. I'm not saying we shouldn't know, or even that I don't want to know. I'm just saying that relations between men and women are tough right now. And there's no app to help with that. 🙄



MOST FAVORED NATION

MEET **GILLIAN NATION**
(YES, THAT'S HER REAL NAME),
PLAYBOY'S 2025
PLAYMATE OF THE YEAR.













ILLIAN NATION GREW UP with too much to do on the ranch to waste her time online. There were the dozen horses and the mule to tend to, the chickens to feed, the barn kittens to look after; in the frigid Montana winters, she'd listen to her iPod as she broke the ice in their water troughs. The nearest movie theater was two hours away, there was one desktop computer in the downstairs family office, and her most frequent connection to pop culture was her weekly delivery of Netflix DVDs in the mail—Quentin Tarantino and Martin Scorsese movies being her favorites. “You never really felt like you were cut off from the world. At least we didn’t,” the 27-year-old says. “I never felt like I was missing out on anything. It was beautiful. I didn’t quite appreciate it as much as you should when you’re a kid. Now, looking back on it, I know that was a really special time.”

Even now as a model in Los Angeles, Nation sees the internet as a tool. She’d rather be spending her time playing piano and journaling or enjoying what the city has to offer. “There’s always something to do,” she says. “I love going to the jazz clubs here and going out to dinner, so it has an element that you can’t get in Montana.”

Still, she goes back as often as she can, especially to be around her horses.

“We would always have an orphan foal. We would take it in, and we would bottle-feed it and sleep in the barn with it,” she recalls of her childhood. “And so I just grew up always having that connection. It’s such a special connection to have. You know, it always sounds cheesy—“horse girls”—but it’s something that you can’t even really explain properly. It’s just an energy that you have with them. That was one of the things that I missed most when I moved to L.A.”

Another major difference between L.A. and Montana, Nation says, is the attitudes of men. “In Montana, say I go out to a bar with my friend or my sister, I would put money on there being a higher chance of a man approaching us there than if I went out somewhere in L.A.,” she says. She suspects that the internet and dating apps have something to do with it. “They still do things the old-fashioned way” in Montana, she says. “They go up to girls and buy them a drink or try to talk to them, whereas in cities, at least in my experience, you really don’t get that as much.”

“I would definitely prefer it if a man approached me in public, obviously in an appropriate way,” Nation adds. In the time she does spend on social media, she’s well-accustomed to messages from men that aren’t quite so polite. “It’s like they’re disconnected. They don’t know how to speak with women,” she says. “Is it the internet that’s making them weird, or have they always just been like that?” —MAGDALENA TAYLOR













What’s your social life like?

Oh, I'm a homebody! I need my space in a big way. I definitely have a circle of very close friends, but I don't go for the big parties. I prefer intimate conversations in quiet settings—places where I can really connect.

Do you have a go-to fitness routine?

I like to listen to my body. I think fitness is just as important mentally as it is physically. I like to mix it up, too—sort of a mishmash of boxing, jogging, Pilates, and weight training.

Are you into music?

My whole family are big music lovers! I grew up listening to classic rock and old country, and I always return to those because it reminds me of being back home. I generally steer clear of rap or current pop music, with a couple exceptions.

Do you have a current obsession?

Always old films! As a kid I used to scour eBay for used movie scripts and read them for fun. I'm still obsessed, but I've weaned myself off the eBay binges.

When no one’s looking, what do you wear?

That's a secret! I will say that I like cozy clothes. I own more sweaters than I care to admit. But mostly I'm in a casual sundress or sweats.

What do you like to cook?

I love cooking! My go to is pan-fried sirloin cooked with butter, rosemary, garlic, a bit of lemon, and some salt and pepper. It's my specialty.

What’s a piece of weird family history?

My grandparents were big 1960s do-gooder hippies in Florida and wanted to

fight poverty. So they wrote a letter to President Lyndon Johnson asking him how they can contribute. Incredibly, Johnson's office wrote back and said they should move to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and launch the first Head Start program for early childhood education. So in 1969 they left Florida, moved to Montana, and did just that.

Is technology good or bad?

Growing up in Montana, I was homeschooled. I lived two hours from anything. That's the way I want to live—no internet, ever. Having said that, I'm in L.A. now. It's impossible to turn off completely. I don't know: a necessary evil?

If you had more time, you would...

Travel more! It's really hard to get away with my job, which is ironic

because I travel for work all the time. It's just that I never get a chance to break away and do my own thing. I'd love to go on a safari in South Africa.

What do you find attractive?

I like a masculine guy. I'm very feminine, so I appreciate the contrast. And I like someone who is funny. If a guy can make me laugh I'm immediately more attracted to him. Also, kindness, charisma, and confidence.

What turns you off?

Easy: arrogance, entitlement, bad hygiene, a lack of motivation, and flakiness.

What’s your ultimate ambition?

After I've settled down somewhere quiet, raised a family, and become gray and old, I can look back and feel like I've led a full life. Doesn't seem that difficult.

GLASER? YOU HARDLY KNOW HER... BY LAUREN LARSON

WE MIGHT NOT be talking about Nikki Glaser right now if not for two open secrets. The first is that after you call someone attractive, you can say pretty much whatever you want about them without sounding too mean. The second is that bullying, if it's funny enough, has no consequences. Sometimes, as was the case with Glaser's set during the three-hour *Roast of Tom Brady*, which aired on Netflix this past spring, congenial bullying can even vault you, at age 39, into a sphere of comedy that you've been climbing toward for decades.

Now 40, Glaser was born in Cincinnati but raised mostly in St. Louis, where she lives today. She started performing stand-up in college, attending the University of Colorado Boulder for a year before finishing her studies at the University of Kansas. As she honed her craft onstage, her audiences grew, and she began appearing, mushroomlike, on talk shows, reality shows (*FBoy Island*), and competition shows (*Dancing With the Stars*); in Amy Schumer films; and on podcasts with Joe Rogan et al. When Covid-19 hit, she retreated to St. Louis to stay with her parents. Rather than letting the pandemic derail her, as it did many of us, Glaser weaved the threads of her adult life together. She emerged from the lockdown fully formed, with legs up to her chin and a tongue sharp enough to cut steel.

Her roast of Brady immediately earned a spot in the canon among comedians and fans; her harshest Reddit critics were silenced. Every single line began with a benign setup before veering into stunningly

clever cruelty, delivered with such a sweet smile—in such a sweet voice—that her roastee didn't feel the punch until much later. The set was her Blue Steel, and the months since then have been a firehose of blessings. Dates on her Alive and Unwell Tour routinely sell out. In August the Golden Globes announced that she would host the award show in 2025, after a year that, as revelations from Sean Combs's parties continue to emerge, may be Hollywood's most roastable yet. (At least it's the most roastable since the jolt of #MeToo.)

I meet Glaser in a hotel suite in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in October, the morning after a sold-out show. The airline lost her luggage the day before, and she's wearing a rapidly procured, interview-appropriate outfit: a light blue slip under a white men's oxford shirt. She sits in a chair by a window in a suite, her smooth crossed legs taking up half the room.

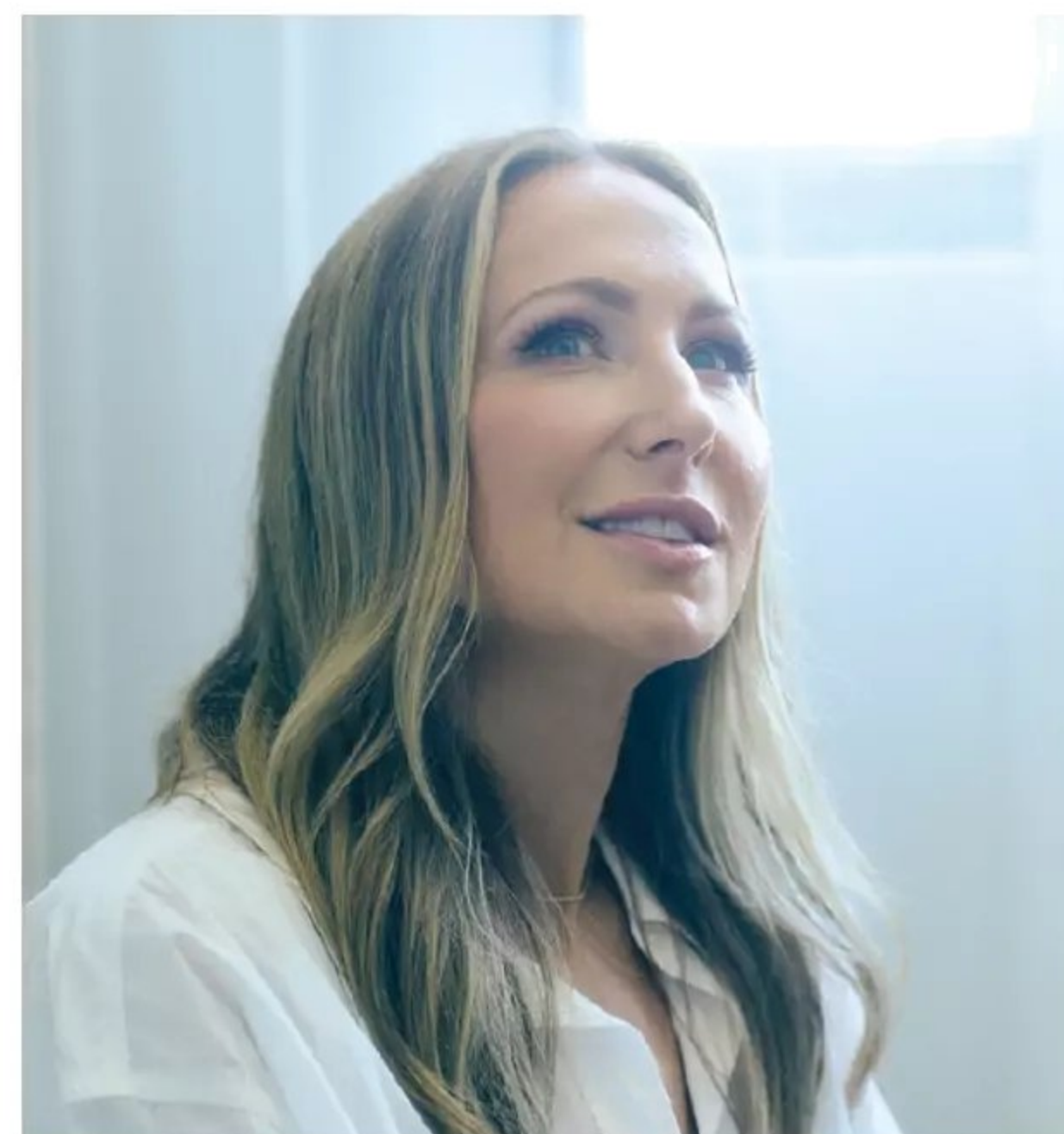
Glaser's candor shouldn't surprise me—she has joked frequently and publicly about her labia—but it does anyway. I assumed, watching her streaming specials and her show, that in her performances she mines a persona fabricated for the stage, complete with fabricated insecurities and beliefs. But it becomes clear as we talk—about comedy, eating disorders, suicide—that Glaser isn't even really caricaturing herself in her stand-up. She's flaying herself. For swaths of her show the night before, my face was frozen in a fusion of those happy-and-sad thespian masks in theater bathrooms. I catch myself making the same expression in our interview.

PLAYBOY: When you're roasting Martha Stewart and she's not laughing, do you dissociate?

GLASER: Totally dissociating. When you're roasting, everyone's seated in your periphery, behind you. I don't even think they mean to do it that way, but it's always very nice, because I can't see, right? I've come across clips and seen that Martha Stewart was just like, *Hmmm*, and didn't really like the jokes, but in the moment I would never have known that. It would have bothered me that she didn't laugh. Now it doesn't—maybe she was playing a character that night. She also wasn't that nice to me backstage when we all met. She could have been nervous, or she could have just gotten some bad news, but I interpreted her reaction as: *She doesn't like me, and she's a mean person*. It was almost nice, because I went out like: *I don't want her to like me. She already doesn't and I didn't even do anything*. I'm sure I would get along with her under different circumstances, and obviously I have so much respect for anyone who does those roasts who isn't the comedian and kills so hard, and she's one of them.

PLAYBOY: What's your ideal demographic to roast?

GLASER: People I'm jealous of, because that's where I find venom. If I don't like someone, it's usually because I'm jealous of them. So it would probably be Victoria's Secret Angels. Models would be my favorite people to roast, because I wouldn't feel as





bad because they're so hot. When I found out Gisele [Bündchen, Brady's ex-wife] was offended by things I said, I jokingly said, "Well, she's been roasting me her whole life with the way she looks." It's not her fault in any way. She's obviously an amazing person—like, I actually really admire her. It hurt *my* feelings that I hurt *her* feelings, and I even thought, when I had written the joke about her that mentioned her name, *This isn't fair, because she didn't sign up for this*. The joke had her getting her ass eaten by her boyfriend. I did understand why she would be annoyed by that. But then I also was like: *You're Gisele*. It was easy for me to dismiss her discomfort, which is really myopic of me.

PLAYBOY: You discussed the value of hotness in your show last night.

GLASER: That jealousy of hot women has permeated my life, and it's a topic I've talked about probably in every single special. I think it's not vapid: People who are hot have a better life. It's currency to be hot. That is a pursuit which, the more I lean into it, the better my career has gone. I know that part of my marketability in this business is that some people want to have sex with me. And yes, it's not all of it, but even women who you think don't care about that stuff can't shake that feeling that it would just be a little bit better if we were hotter. When people say,

"Nikki, you don't need to worry about your looks, you're the next Joan Rivers," I always say, "Yeah, I'll probably die on an operating table too, trying to stay young." [*Rivers died after an endoscopy of her throat.*] I've had throat surgeries to make my voice better.

PLAYBOY: Have you really?

GLASER: Yeah, I had one, really to become a better singer. I had nodules. But my voice is very masculine, husky, grating, and after I had the nodules removed, it was just a more pleasant voice to listen to. It was just more feminine, and helped me to be more palatable to the industry. That wasn't the



intent of it—I really liked singing, and the nodules were getting in the way of it. But then I got surgery, and it improved everything. I had a facelift on my throat, and I will get it again and again and again, because I didn’t learn how to use my voice differently, so it’s just re-damaging.

PLAYBOY: What genre of teenager were you?

GLASER: In high school I was just quiet. I just didn’t want to be made fun of. I was really scared of being called ugly: I had a feeling I was ugly and no one was saying it and that they were going to if they noticed;



“I HAVE THE PERFECT LEVEL OF FAME. I MAKE MORE MONEY THAN I EVER COULD HAVE DREAMED OF MAKING. I GET TO HIRE MY FRIENDS. IF IT GOES BACK DOWN TO WHAT IT WAS A YEAR AGO, I’LL BE TOTALLY FINE.”

if I never had any attention on myself, none of the boys would even think to call me ugly. I think I had a couple moments of people seeing me and being like, “Yo, buckteeth”—I used to have buckteeth—just little moments of getting called out for my looks by boys who probably liked me, thinking back on it. But I had a really great group of girlfriends that I’m still best friends with. We didn’t have boys bogging us down. I loved Dave Matthews Band. That was my identity: being obsessed with Dave Matthews. I was so horny for him. I realize that’s what that was. I was very turned on by Dave Matthews and didn’t understand what was coursing through my body. I thought I just loved the music, but I really was just wanting to have sex with him and masturbate to him, but I didn’t know what those feelings were in high school. By late high school, though, I was starting to be into boys. Boys that liked Dave Matthews.

PLAYBOY: What does a Dave Matthews fixation do to you as you move through the world? What’s your type?

GLASER: I am attracted to men with dark brooding eyes who have a gruff low voice.

PLAYBOY: So then college happened, and by then you’re into non-Dave Matthews boys?

GLASER: Well, it went away. Because to get boys, I thought I had to be thin. And I got an eating disorder my senior year of high school. Being anorexic is fucking horrible. You’re hungry all the time, your body hurts. And I just didn’t know how to get out of it. And honestly, it was suicide. I was a really depressed person in high school. It was just a way to die, because I didn’t want to be average. I wanted to be Jennifer Aniston: *I’ll start doing commercials in high school, and then I’ll get a sitcom by the time I’m 25.* That was my goal. And there was no indication that that was gonna happen for me. I couldn’t even get into a bad theater school. I just realized that recently, about anorexia: It was the first thing I realized I was good at that everyone says is hard to do.

PLAYBOY: Where did that drive to be above average, particularly as a performer, come from?

GLASER: I just think I had a family that was focused on what other people thought about us, and we really valued people on TV. That was, I think, why I wanted to be on TV. What brought my family together was watching TV together and watching comedy together. So I think it totally makes sense that that’s what I ended up doing. But it was being so grotesquely thin that led me to dial up my personality. I was already funny with my friends in high school. I was surrounded by funny people, and I wasn’t even close to the funniest of them. I’m good at remembering funny things and putting them all together—I’m a curator of funny. When I went to college, people started saying, “You’re really funny.” Because I was just trying to make friends, and the only way anyone would consider being close to me is if I was so loud that they’re like, *Oh, we forget what she looks like.* The second someone told me “You should try stand-up,” I was like, “I’ve got nothing else, I should do it.” And I did it. And then it felt so good. It was the first time I ever did something—besides starving myself—that I was like, *I’m good at this.* On a dime, I was like, *This is my new thing.*

PLAYBOY: When do you feel like you got out of not eating being your raison? Or did you?

GLASER: It was slow. The second I started stand-up I was like, *OK, I need to call a counselor. I need to actually try to get better, I want to live.* Because every night before that—literally, every night before that first day’s performance—I would pray to die in my sleep, because it was just a nightmare. I was in school in Colorado. I was cold. I had no body fat. My bones hurt in class, my hair was falling out. I’m constantly hungry, so I’m always in a bad mood. It’s the fucking worst. My parents remember, too, when I called them and we were just all crying, because we kind of knew that I was going to actually start trying to find a cure. I probably have about as much of an eating disorder as most girls do now; it’s still there. And when things aren’t going well in my life, it gets turned up in different ways. But since Covid, I’ve re-entered a type of program that really has given me a solid foundation of: *OK, I don’t starve myself anymore.*

PLAYBOY: Why was that the turning point?

GLASER: Because before 2020 my career was really going well in New York, and I was really busy, but I had started doing intermittent fasting, which is adult anorexia. It's acceptable anorexia because it has a different name and, like, men do it. I would say from 2018 to 2020, I would just not eat all day. It would just be lattes and water. And then at night, I would go do a set at the Comedy Cellar, and then I would get offstage, and I would start just eating all through the night. It was horrible bingeing, but it wasn't showing up because I was starving all day. So it was [*uses air quotes*] *working for me*, and I really didn't have time to pay attention to it because I was so busy. And then when Covid hit, I moved back home to be with my parents. I think a lot of people's illnesses became apparent when everything went away, because if you have a busy enough life, you can really lie to yourself about your addictions. I really hated my life before Covid. I had a TV show that was about to go on E!, which seemed like a dream—it was my own TV show, my name on it—and I was begging for it not to go. I was just so exhausted. When Covid hit I was like, *Oh my God, I can't believe something happened to make it go away*. It was awesome. I'm back at Mom and Dad's house, and *no one* is doing stand-up, so I don't even have to feel bad that *I'm* not doing stand-up. I started going to meetings online for eating disorder stuff, and I was really involved in working a program around it for a while. I've gotten away from it, but I will say that since 2020, if I'm hungry, I eat. And I'm really proud to say that.

PLAYBOY: Did Covid make the kind of material-gathering you do difficult?

GLASER: After Covid I remember being like, *I can't even think funny anymore*. Words aren't word-ing. I just went and binged *30 Rock* and *Veep*, and suddenly I'm back.

PLAYBOY: You described that ability to associate things from different realms—like when you told Blake Griffin he “looks like a Black guy that got made by a printer running out of ink”—as “curating.” How do you do that?

GLASER: That joke I did not write. I write a lot of my roast jokes, but I assembled a team for that. With those kinds of jokes, the goal is to land on a way of describing something that is highly specific and possibly niche that has something that everyone can relate to but that no one has said before. I just collect specific things. The other day I was just driving and I saw a Boost Mobile store, and I



was like: *Boost Mobile, I'm gonna fit that into a joke someday*. “I dated a guy that works at a Boost Mobile.” That's funnier than “I dated a guy that works at a mall kiosk.”

PLAYBOY: What's the ideal kind of fame?

GLASER: I think I honestly have it. Feeling like people think I'm underrated. Living in St. Louis, not having to live in New York or L.A. Being able to go out and not get recognized and being photographed and not being bugged all the time. I have the perfect level of fame. I make more money than I ever could have dreamed of making. I get to hire my friends. If it goes back down to what it was a year ago, I'll be totally fine. Even if it completely disappears, and if nobody comes to see me, I have other passions. I'll start an animal rescue. I am just as passionate about saving animals and educating people about animal cruelty as I am about comedy.

PLAYBOY: You made a joke last night about killing your dog by throwing a ball into traffic.

GLASER: I have so many jokes about animal cruelty and me doing acts of it. It's like, I say the opposite of how I feel, and I like saying the darkest thing. My dog *could* die if I threw a ball into traffic. It's crazy that you could kill your dog and people would be like, *Oh, that's such a shame*.

But yeah, I'm at a perfect position, because I have a very normal life outside of show business, and most of my friends are not in show business. So it can go away, and I could be happy, but please don't let it anytime soon. It's so fun.

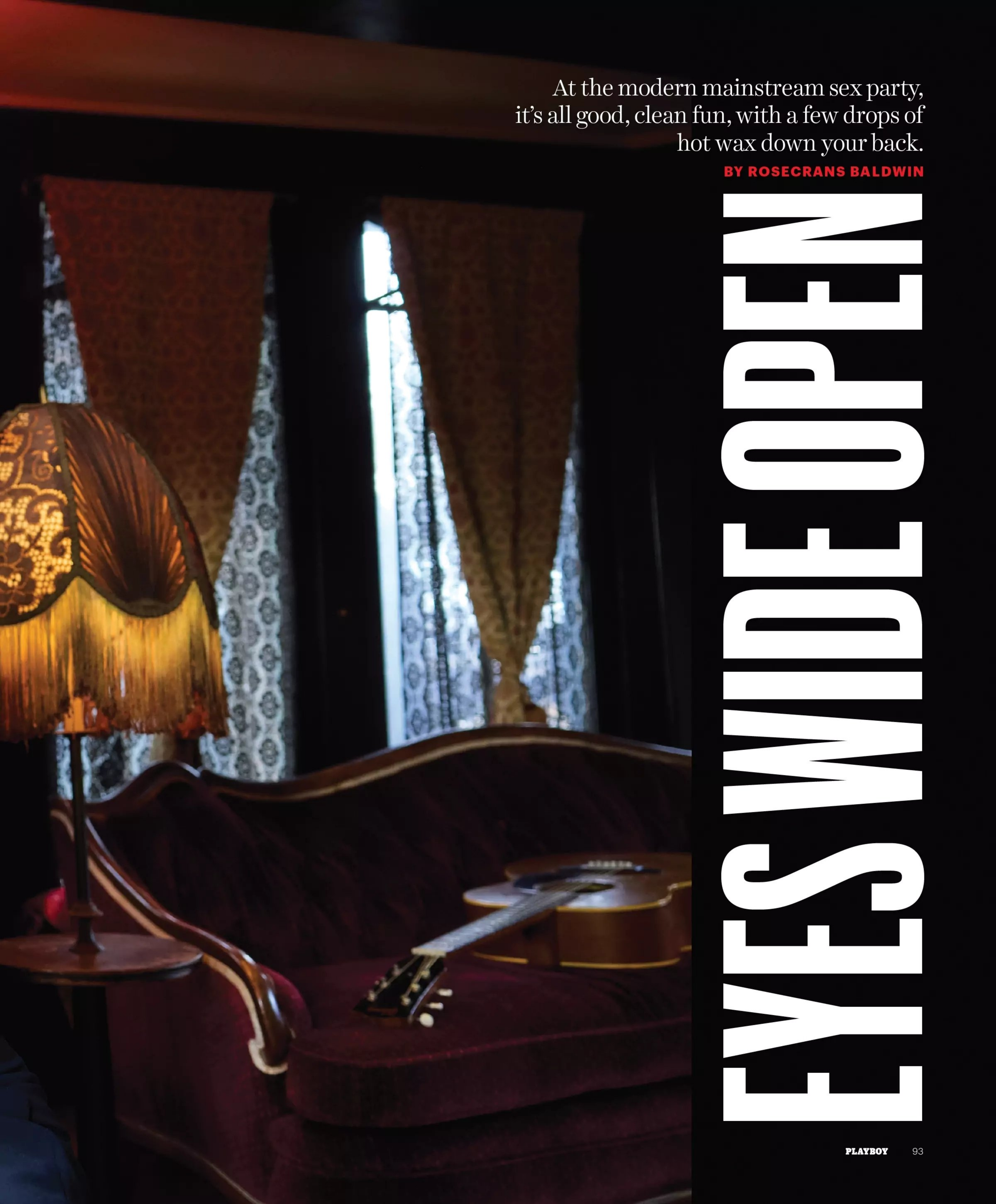
PLAYBOY: Are you, being in this ideal place, ready for the opposite, when the Golden Globes go great and everybody recognizes you and you can't go to the store unaccosted?

GLASER: Bring it on. Because it won't last, it will go away, it won't be forever. There's just no way that I'll be able to maintain that. It's like when you get into really good shape. I always delude myself into thinking, *This will be this way forever. I'm always going to be this cut*. You just can't. I think I'm ready for it and it would be nice, though. But I don't want to find out who in Hollywood is a pedophile and then have to keep it a secret. Because you do—you have to keep it a secret, otherwise they will take everything from you. I don't want those secrets; I am not to be trusted with those codes, because I'll spill the beans. So I don't think they'll ever actually let me in. ♫





Lovely Fate
organizer
Vanessa Duffy:
"It's difficult to
find success
in this lifestyle
without
growing your
emotional
intelligence."

A dimly lit room with a lamp and a guitar. The lamp has a fringed shade and is on a small table. A guitar is resting on a dark, upholstered chair. In the background, there is a window with patterned curtains and a bright light source.

At the modern mainstream sex party,
it's all good, clean fun, with a few drops of
hot wax down your back.

BY ROSECRANS BALDWIN

NEED FOR WIDE EYES

THE ROOM

was packed with almost 100 attractive people in different states of undress, which is not unusual on a Saturday night in Los Angeles. What was strange, maybe, was what they were watching. The event was being held in an unmarked, nondescript building near Hollywood. Its main room included a small stage. The audience included many model-seeming women in lingerie, their nipples on display, and a lot of model-looking men in fetish harnesses, their nipples sheathed. Onstage, a man lay on his back on a table. He wore little besides an Egyptian pharaoh's headdress and a lot of rope, binding his arms. The performance was billed as "Mummy Dearest." One of the organizers whispered in my ear, "Get ready for a burial." At the same time, a DJ cued up "Heads Will Roll" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and a tall, slender woman arrived—yet again, gorgeous—and climbed on top, straddling the man. She stroked her vulva and smiled. She massaged her breasts and gasped. She leaned forward to suck the pharaoh's cock, eyeing the crowd, and the crowd eyed her right back.

A moment later, while over the loudspeakers Karen O sang, "The men cry out, the girls cry out"—the party was nicknamed "Howl and Scream"—the woman crawled up the man's chest to fuck his mouth with her pussy, and several women in the crowd shouted with delight. Perhaps anticipating they'd be doing the same thing soon.

Lovely Fate describes itself as "a social club for open minds & playful hearts." I was invited to attend its Halloween party on the condition that I not participate, so to speak, or reveal any identifying characteristics about the attendees. One of the organizers, Vanessa Duffy, met me at the door when I'd arrived a few hours earlier. She was dressed as a dark angel: black wings, black heels, black lingerie and thong. (Over the course of the night, I often felt like I'd wandered into an X-rated Victoria's Secret Fashion Show.) "I'm so glad you made it," she said. "Are you ready? Are you excited?"

Truthfully, I was nervous—I'd never been to a sex party before, never mind attended one for work—though I

wasn't for long. Lovely Fate does a lot to make newcomers comfortable. On the sidewalk a man with an iPad asked me to scan a QR code and show my ID and ticket, then read and consent to the evening's conduct code, which I'd already been emailed several times. Inside, next to a coatroom, was a second round of security: ID, ticket, etc. Everything seemed thoroughly produced: electronic music, club decor, a Gothic velvet vibe.

Vanessa led me upstairs for an orientation required of first-timers. There were about 10 of us in a small room, lit purple. Two of Lovely Fate's organizers—a man named R. who was dressed as a vampire and a woman in lingerie who called herself Z La'Vex—walked us through how things worked. (The same rules were posted on the wall in most rooms.) Basically, the night relied on communication and consent. No touching anyone, even platonically, without asking first. If you invited someone to "play" and they declined, you couldn't ask them again. Also, no drugs, no exchange

of money, and no phones except in designated spaces. Also, volunteers wearing glowing bracelets would be roaming around to answer questions or intervene if anything seemed off. In the end, the violation of a rule often meant security would escort you off the premises and your membership might be revoked.

Next we were offered lanyards with LED pendants: orange if we were open to playing with others, blue if we didn't want to be approached. I was the only one who chose blue—though as a long-married person for whom such things weren't part of the picture, could I imagine myself in another lifetime picking orange? Why not?

Finally, it was time to explore. "The biggest space is mostly for socializing," Vanessa said, leading me around. "People are seeing old friends, making new ones, maybe meeting someone they'll play with later." The main room had a high ceiling, a stage area, and elaborate lighting. People mingled while a DJ played. Video art filled one wall with abstract erotic scenes, leading me to think: This is what it might look like if Björk threw a sex party. Most attendees seemed to be in their 30s and 40s: all races, sizes, types, definitely all attractive in their way, and extremely so in several cases. A naked woman was being tied up elaborately with rope. Couples sat on low couches making out or simply chatting; the same for trios. The atmosphere was that of an enthusiastic cocktail party—even if someone was wearing a dog collar with his partner holding the leash.

Vanessa escorted me to the bar (drinks were BYO) and introduced me to a couple of friends, both hot, both welcoming. The man was dressed in a white coat with a patch that said "Dr. Feelgood." He produced a doctor's prescription pad and said, "Vanessa, I'm writing you a script." He handed it over. *You need to get fucked.* "Oh, yes, please," she said, laughing, and led me away.

•••
Sex parties are nothing new—they range from orgia in ancient Greece to key parties in Connecticut—but they have never been as organized and personalized, produced and packaged, as they are now. Recently, the *New York Times* reported that "sexual wellness" was trending in the travel industry, as if it was just another health fad. In L.A.,

perhaps the fitness capital of America, not to mention the capital of outré behavior, multiple people in the scene say that parties are rife, occurring nearly every weekend, in private homes and clubs, for those in the know.

But this is probably not a surprise. L.A. is home to Hollywood and the pornography industry. It's stocked with fashion models, OnlyFans models, and lots of everyday folks who hit the gym once a day, if not twice. It's a city full of toned, horny, often lonely people, for some of whom casual sex is just another Pilates class. One married couple who host annual swingers nights at their house for up to 150 people say that some guests travel from other countries simply for the physical beauty of their groups. "There's a lot of good-looking people in L.A.," the husband says, "so that helps."

Still, the more I inquired, the more I heard that for people on the edge of sexual norms, whether they're in the kink scene or in "the lifestyle," as swinging is now known, in the United States L.A. is ground zero. Which means updated ideas about sex positivity—being open-minded and enthusiastic toward different sexual identities. It means erotic events like Lovely Fate's. The married couple who organize their own evenings, who have traveled abroad for similar parties, say the city's only true rival is Berlin.

Personally, I'd always wondered how these things worked. How did people manage jealousy? Was it all wham-bam acrobatics, or did guests talk about their kids during breaks? And what if I went to such a night—would I be overwhelmed by stage fright, by fear? The journalist in me wanted to know how the thing was put together, what went into producing an evening of total sexual abandon that also had well-defined limits. At present, simmering underground, Los Angeles has multiple spaces and clubs—almost all requiring membership—to accommodate a gamut of sexual interests. Bar Sinister in Hollywood is BDSM-friendly. Club Joi downtown caters to swinger types. Founded in Beverly Hills, Snctm (pronounced "Sanctum"), perhaps the best known, offers an *Eyes Wide Shut*-style party for high rollers. A single male member of Snctm can pay up to \$35,000 annually to attend events held in a penthouse, where the men wear black tie, women wear much less, and



celebrities have allegedly been in the crowd. (More typically, attendees are wealthy men and their dates, several previous guests say.)

Then there's the Bocanegra Club, for non-monogamous couples. There's The Play, for lifestyle types who like performance art. There's an entire hidden network of private nights in private homes—and these are just some of the offerings catering to people who are straight or bi. For events exclusively for lesbians, there isn't much, people say, though for gay men there is no shortage of circuit parties, in private homes or warehouses downtown. "I can go on [the cruising app] Sniffies right now and find you a dozen parties tonight, no problem," a friend said recently over coffee.

Alina Ratuska co-founded the KNKY Rabbit Club 13 years ago. KNKY's events, described as "a playground for the artistically provocative," are known for their high-end production values, as well as a sense of togetherness among guests—enlivened by sensuality, sure, but not just that. Ratuska used to be a creative director at Snctm. I

TODAY'S GATHERINGS MAKE AN ATTEMPT TO BE MORE PROGRESSIVE, MORE WELCOMING, WITHOUT DULLING THE EDGE.

Mistress Luna
Experience is
Lovely Fate's
creative director.

asked why she started her own group. "Mostly the energy wasn't right. It was just so male-driven," she said. "As much as [Snctm] was great, and there were a lot of amazing things around it, I never felt that it was a community."

"Let's say a guy wants to go and have sex with a lot of girls," says Eyal Brikman, Ratuska's life and business partner. "That's not what our club is for."

This is what sets today's gatherings apart from those of previous eras: an attempt to be more progressive, more welcoming, without dulling the edge. The more people I interviewed, the more "community" came up—an appreciation for shared values, freethinking, and making new friends (with benefits).

And the one club people mentioned most along those lines—if somehow I could wrangle an interview, never mind a ticket—was Lovely Fate.

Lovely Fate got its start in 2017, when the organizers tried an experiment. At the time, they say, most parties were separated between kink and lifestyle, where sex either wasn't the point, as in BDSM dungeons, or definitely was, like swinger nights in a living room somewhere. For Lovely Fate, the question was: What if they could produce a safe, fun, queer-friendly event where folks with different interests felt comfortable with—not to mention turned on by—intermingling? For the first party they rented a warehouse in Culver City and invited about 100 guests—and it was a hit. “With the feedback we received from people, we couldn't just leave it at that,” says D., one of the founders. (The organizers asked not to be identified beyond their first names, and most of my interviews were conducted over Zoom, sans video.)

Z La'Vex works as Lovely Fate's music and performance director.

“I'M STILL A BABY IN THIS WORLD,” SAYS ONE PARTICIPANT. “MY PROBLEM IS I HAVE TOO MUCH SEX WITH TOO MANY HOT PEOPLE.”

Today, Lovely Fate has about 4,000 members, for whom it throws monthly themed parties. Other nights, it offers workshops and classes, for instance in shibari, a Japanese style of bondage, or tantric intimacy. At the same time, the organizers say, they are scrupulous and take their time screening applications for membership. (A friend of mine applied months ago and is still waiting to hear.) All applicants are evaluated individually, and the organizers say they're looking for people with the right “energy”: people who can be trusted, who share their values and would contribute something unique to their gatherings—are they some kind of an artist, or do they add diversity?—and who aren't just looking to get laid. “The name Lovely Fate is a reflection of our belief that exploring one's sexuality should be a positive and joyful thing, not something dark or seedy,” D. says. “It is actually something quite lovely if you're doing it the right way.”

(I will say, the organizers were

incredibly on-message during our conversations. Then again, they have a lot to protect.)

Dan Benson and his girlfriend, Sushi, are members—both in their 30s, and both indie-rock hot. By the time they met in 2023, Benson, a former star of the teen sitcom *Wizards of Waverly Place*, had shifted his acting career to adult entertainment. “I'm kind of known as the guy who went from the Disney Channel to OnlyFans,” he says, grinning. Benson mostly makes content for gay men, though when he and Sushi met, he was just another straight dude on the apps. Sushi says she had been in the lifestyle since 2019. She quickly wanted to bring Dan into it, if only to meet all the friends she'd made. “I was like, ‘I will go at your pace, at whatever comfort level,’” she says. “But eventually, I wanted him to get into it with me, because it's part of my life now, and I can't go back.”

Benson and Sushi first attended a Lovely Fate party together in the spring of 2023. (They were not in attendance the night I went.) “What really struck me was the fun and lightheartedness of it all,” Benson says. “Everyone was so kind and so energetic.” They wandered the party together, watching other couples fool around. No one recognized him from his Disney days, though he says that has happened since. End of the night, they wound up playing together while people fucked on either side—and while he had a great time, he says, he also noticed himself struggling to adapt emotionally. Dealing with jealousy, nerves, and some tension in his chest. Even now, many parties later, if they are messing around with other people, and Sushi wants to be with another man, he often will leave the room. At the same time, Benson has no desire to quit. “I'm still a baby in this world,” he says. “People have been in this for years and years, and I'm swimming in the shallow end.” He laughs and shrugs it off. “My problem is I have too much sex with too many hot people.”

At the party I got the impression that this was probably an issue shared by many. At about 10 p.m. people pressed to the front of the main room for the first performance. Onstage, a beautiful naked woman lay on her back, wearing a leather shroud. Another woman—in lingerie, likewise



beautiful—started to drip hot wax on her body from a candle. The woman on the table began to writhe. (Lovely Fate’s performers are often volunteers drawn from the membership, the organizers say, though if they’re being paid for their “scenes,” they aren’t allowed to play with guests.) At the same time, another woman onstage started to sing the Eurythmics’ “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)” to backup music from the DJ. When she hit the second line of the verse—“Some of them want to abuse you, some of them want to be abused”—she grabbed another candle and tipped wax over the woman’s breasts. The woman seemed (painfully) ecstatic.

“I’ve always felt super safe, very welcomed,” says one performer, who’s attended Lovely Fate parties before. “We all just want to do our weird stuff.”

The hours began to blend together, as one organizer after another escorted me around the party. (Singles don’t have many opportunities for loitering in the rooms. “Instead, we want you to meet a friend downstairs,” R. said. “Maybe just say, ‘Hey, do you want to go check out what’s going on upstairs?’”) In one spot a half dozen people were kissing and chatting, a few stroking each other. Another room, dedicated to bondage, looked like a vampire’s library. A woman was tied to a St. Andrew’s cross—an enormous wooden X—and was being flogged by a man with a braided whip while a dozen people watched. In the same room, another corner, a woman was draped over a black pommel horse, getting eaten out from behind. Then there was a covered patio for smoking—I sat down to make some notes and got distracted by a woman sitting behind me, moaning softly from whatever her partner was doing (it felt impolite to inquire exactly what)—and a room designated for rest and recovery, no play allowed.

For my part, it all seemed hot but somewhat vanilla; the raunch of Berghain’s basements, this was not. Then two or three more rooms, festooned with mattresses, linens, condoms, and lube—everything clean, everything nice-looking—that were also starting to heat up. A man stood in the low light while a woman licked his cock. A few feet away, a girl lay on a mattress with another woman’s head between her thighs. Multiple people

watched. Couples held hands. A neon sign said “let’s get weird tonight,” and I caught myself thinking, actually, nothing here seemed too odd at all. If anything, it seemed like normal human stuff—fucking in public view, sure, but no less wholesome for it.

There were still more performances, more diversions. A side room downstairs offered a sexy doctor’s office with free medical exams—I was waiting in line to find out exactly what kind of exams when I got pulled away to watch a “voodoo show,” where two performers knelt on the stage, playing with dolls, and two performers stood behind them, doing whatever the dolls were doing, which got X-rated fast.

Finally, the burial, with the woman straddling the pharaoh’s face. It was obvious the crowd was appreciative: A naked man in a cowboy hat watched attentively; a woman in tall boots and not much else kept opening and closing her lips. Especially when, about halfway through the song, the woman onstage slid back to straddle the guy’s waist. She closed her eyes and started rubbing herself. Her face contorted, her hips bucked, her other hand was in her hair. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs song escalated—“The men cry out, the girls cry out”—and suddenly, pronouncedly, the woman squirted. Hard. Sending arcs of ejaculate all over the man’s chest and face.

The crowd was ecstatic. “That’s fucking impressive,” a woman near me said under her breath.

I left the party at half past midnight, as the energy was rising; the organizers asked me to leave before things got too risqué. I was slightly disappointed because I’d been surprised by how



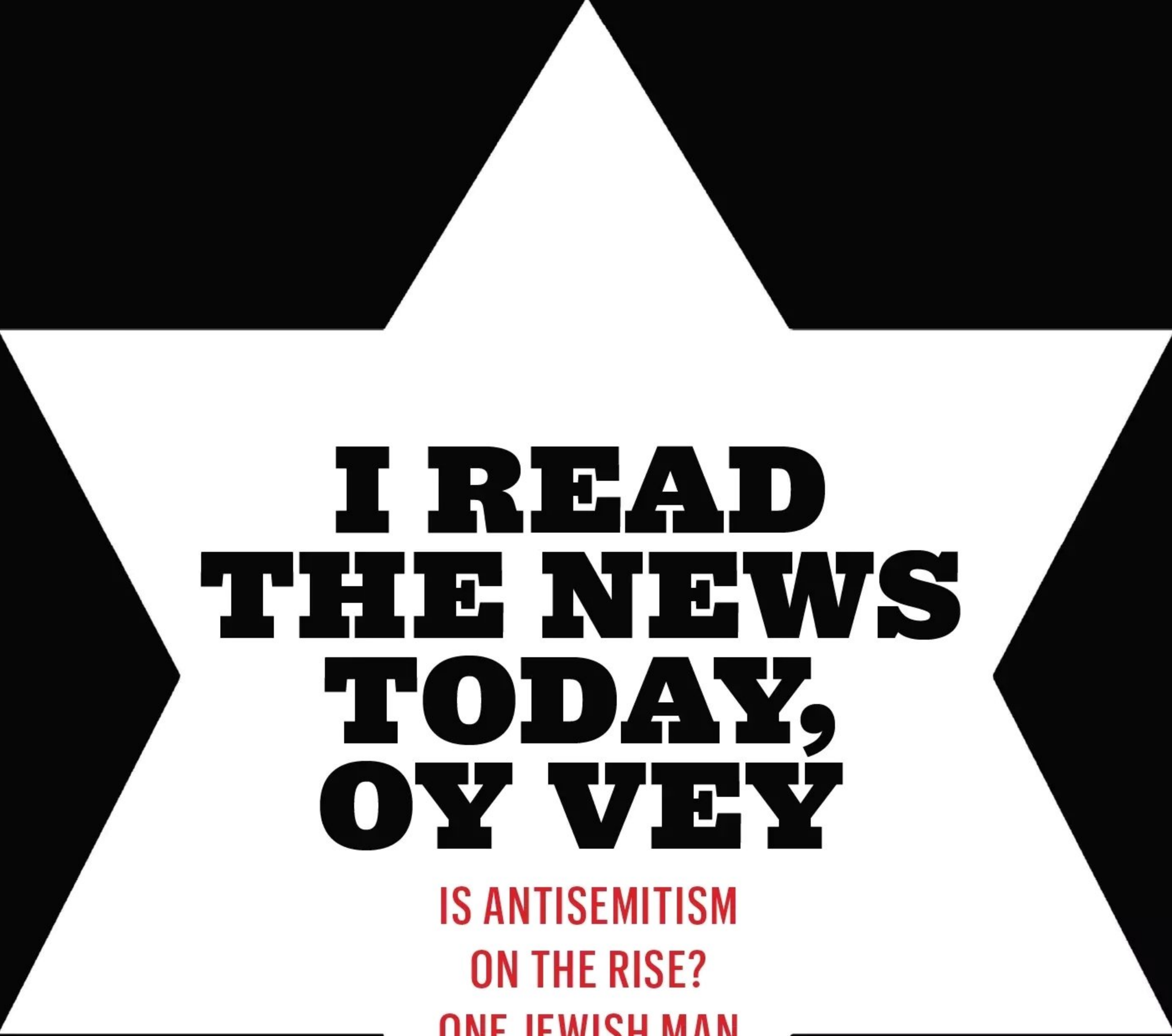
NOTHING HERE SEEMED ODD AT ALL. IF ANYTHING, IT SEEMED LIKE NORMAL HUMAN STUFF—FUCKING IN PUBLIC VIEW, SURE, BUT NO LESS WHOLESOME FOR IT.

From left: Duffy, Z La’Vex, and Mistress Luna Experience

comfortable I felt—not from a desire to jump in (I was in work mode, which is maybe my least turned-on state), but by the honesty of it all, being among a bunch of oddballs having fun. I booked a car and wondered: What had I seen, really? I could tell you I saw a celebrity, but since I can’t reveal their name, what’s the point? So many people today complain about feeling disconnected. They miss and crave human touch. They feel trapped in stifling relationships, or simply by their phones; a friend of mine once compared dating apps to slot machines that are unlikely to ever pay out. And sure, maybe a gathering like Lovely Fate’s—a reasonably kinky, ultra consensual evening—wasn’t the solution for all people, but it definitely seemed to be for some. “It’s difficult to find success in this lifestyle without growing your emotional intelligence,” Vanessa said a few days after the party. “You learn so much about your desires, triggers, boundaries. And you have to develop the skills to communicate that. And that kind of blossoming is beautiful.”

Perhaps what surprised me most was how tame it all seemed. This was a place where fucking became something fun to do with friends and strangers alike, and put everyone in a good mood. People say America is losing its sense of community. It seemed to be thriving at Lovely Fate. Maybe we need more sex parties. 🍌





I READ THE NEWS TODAY, OY VEY

**IS ANTISEMITISM
ON THE RISE?
ONE JEWISH MAN
DECIDED
TO FIND OUT.**

**BY SHALOM
AUSLANDER**

1 LOS ANGELES

I've never been a big fan of human beings. Why? Watch CNN. Watch Fox News. Spend an hour on social media. We evolved from monkeys, folks, the only animals in the zoo that *should* be behind bars. So while I despise war, it doesn't surprise me. And while I reject racism, I'm not shocked at its ubiquity. And when the Anti-Defamation League announced recently that it had recorded a 300 percent increase in antisemitism this past year, I, a Jew, wasn't particularly astonished.

"Three hundred?" I thought. "That's it? That's not bad."

The only thing that surprised me was that anyone was surprised, particularly Jews, who ought to know better. Raised on my people's history of being hated—of Holocausts and pogroms and inquisitions—I have long expected that one day, soon enough, I will have to run, or hide, even here in America. That's why we Jews live on the coasts; worse comes to worst, we can swim for it.

And then, one afternoon a few months ago, my young son put down his Rectangular Glass of Doom and asked me the eternal question:

"Dad, do I *have* to be a Jew?"

"Well," I explained, "I'm a Jew and Mum's a Jew. So you're a Jew."

"But I don't want to be a Jew."

"Why not?"

He sighed.

"Because everyone hates Jews," he said.

He'd been online. He'd seen the news. He'd heard the numbers.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, in the time since Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, there had been more than 2,000 antisemitic incidents on university campuses. Another survey reported that 3.5 million U.S. Jews had experienced antisemitism. Steven Spielberg compared the situation to Berlin in 1938. A book called *Everyone Loves Dead Jews* was a bestseller. So was one called *Jews Don't Count*. And so I sat down beside my son, put my arm around his shoulder, and tried cynicism.

It's kind of my wheelhouse.

"Don't worry about it, buddy," I said. "Everyone hates everyone these days."

He seemed relieved enough, but I began to wonder if indeed it was time. Run Time. Holocaust Time. Hiding in the Attic Time.

This Hanukkah, kids, everyone gets a Glock.

But was it really that hateful out there? How would Steven Spielberg know? When was the last time he went outside? More importantly, how could I know? I mean really, truly *know*. I don't trust the news, and I don't trust the ADL. I know that I haven't personally experienced antisemitism in a very long time, but I also know that I don't exactly look like a Jew. I was raised in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in upstate New York; in my most observant days, I wore the black suit, white shirt, yarmulke, and fedora

THE YARMULKE I PURCHASED FROM A JUDAICA STORE IN LOS ANGELES. "DOES IT COME WITH MACE?" I ASKED THE SHOP OWNER. "IT SHOULD," HE SAID. "WEAR IT IN GOOD HEALTH." "OPTIMIST," I REPLIED.

most people associate with religious Jews, long white tzitzit dangling from my waistband. Today I have long hair, tattoos, earrings; I could have walked right past the Charlottesville tiki torchers and they would have only stopped me to ask for directions.

But what if I still wore the clothing of my youth? What if I wore a yarmulke, a black fedora, white tzitzit? Would I then experience the antisemitism that seemed to be all the rage these days? Because if I did, maybe it was time to get the fuck out of America once and for all.

I decided to find out. To see what it was like, in America a quarter century into the third millennium, being obviously, noticeably, undeniably that most hated of all hated creatures:

A Jew.

I packed Band-Aids. I packed gauze pads. I bought a black suit at Target, the perfectly named store for Jews, and ordered a black fedora and white tzitzit from Amazon. The yarmulke I purchased from a Judaica store on Fairfax Avenue in Los Angeles.

"Does it come with Mace?" I asked the shop owner.

"It should," he said. "Wear it in

good health."

"Optimist," I replied.

...

I hurried quickly through Los Angeles International Airport. I wasn't late, I was just afraid. I'd checked my Glass of Doom before I left. It told me that hundreds of Stars of David had been spray-painted on buildings in Paris, just as the Nazis had done in the 1930s. It told me that antisemitic banners had been hung around Ohio. It told me that the senator from Arizona had posted "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles" on her X account in support of the far-right Alternative for Germany party.

I could feel the scornful eyes of every passerby upon me: the businessman who did a double take as he hurried past, eyeing my black fedora; the snickering teen and her Nazi boyfriend; the mother, eyeing my tzitzit strings, who steered her stroller a bit too far out of my way as if her demon spawn might catch Jew from me if she got too close.

I had decided to start my investigation across the country in New York City. NYC doesn't seem like a likely place for a Jew to find hatred, but according to the ADL, it had more reported incidents in 2024 than anywhere in the United States. If it was bad for Jews in New York City, I knew, it was bad for us everywhere.

I got to security, took off my suit jacket, shoes, and belt, and put them in a tray. The Transportation Security Administration agent, a bitter woman who had been born sneering and was sneering ever since, looked me up and down.

"Hat's gotta come off," the agent growled at me.

"I have to wear it," I said.

"Hat's gotta come off."

"It's my religion. I'm supposed to..."

"The HAT'S gotta come OFF," she barked.

I glared at her as I removed my hat and placed it in the tray. I decided to report her once I cleared security; I may have had to suffer her antisemitism, but I didn't have to let her get away with it.

I stepped to the line for the body scanner.

The man behind me took my place at the conveyor belt.

He was wearing a Dodgers hat.

"Hat's gotta come off," she growled at him.

2

NEW YORK

The taxi driver was a brown-skinned man with a white *taqiyah* on his head. His name, according to his taxi license, was Aziz. As we headed from Kennedy Airport into Manhattan, he glanced at me in the rearview mirror. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Never seen a Jew before, ayatollah?” I thought.

“You live in New York?” he asked.

Because all Jews live in New York.

“Why?” I snapped.

“You from Borough Park?” he asked.

The neighborhood of Borough Park, Brooklyn, is home to the largest Orthodox Jewish community outside Israel. So of course I’m from Borough Park. All Jews live in Borough Park when we’re not controlling Hollywood.

“No,” I replied sharply. “Are you?”

“Yes,” he said. “But I had to move

out once my *kinderlach* grew up.”

Kinderlach is Yiddish for “children.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

Aziz laughed and told me his story. Five years ago, because of rising corruption in his native Uzbekistan, he moved with his family to New York, where he managed to get a job working in the kitchen of an ultra-Orthodox yeshiva; it was there that he learned the Yiddish words and phrases that now peppered his speech. An attorney back in Uzbekistan, he enjoyed the physicality of his new job, and the close Hasidic community reminded him of his homeland. The rabbis were accepting; he prayed downstairs to Allah, they prayed upstairs to Yahweh. A year later, though, Covid-19 hit, and the yeshiva closed. The rabbis continued to pay him anyway. For two years. They also fed him, providing him and his family with three meals a day. When he and his family outgrew his one-bedroom apartment—his *kinderlach* having grown older—the head rabbi found him a two-bedroom

apartment he could afford. To this day, he attends the weddings and bar mitzvahs of the Jewish friends he made there.

“Are they OK?” I asked. “I heard New York was dangerous for Jews these days.”

Aziz scoffed.

“New York is safe for everybody,” he said.

“What about at Columbia University?” I asked. “I heard it’s bad at Columbia University.”

At this Aziz shrugged.

“Maybe at Columbia University,” he said. “College students, they’re meshuga.”

Hebrew for “crazy.”

We arrived at my hotel, and Aziz helped me with my bag.

“*A bi gezunt*,” he said with a wide smile.

Be well.

**I ASKED MY SON ON THE UCLA CAMPUS:
WAS HE SAFE? WAS HE AFRAID?
“HARD TO FEAR A PROTEST WHEN YOU
CAN SEE THEM DOORDASHING FOOD.”**



...

Last spring, upon hearing word of the violent antisemitic protests at the University of California at Los Angeles, I texted my older son, a student there, to make sure he was safe.

“Everything OK?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he said. “I saw the encampments, but it’s not a violent thing.”

I told him I heard the Jewish students were so afraid that some had even left campus. He’d heard that as well.

“But there are a lot of Jews in the encampment too,” he replied.

The biggest annoyance, he said, was the swarm of news choppers that had been circling overhead all day, and the army of news vans camped outside the campus. They were making the students nervous. All most of them wanted to do was go to class.

Was he safe, I asked? Was he afraid?

“Hard to fear a protest when you can see them DoorDashing food,” he replied.

The reports from Columbia had been even more shocking: violence, riots, Jewish students trapped

inside Columbia/Barnard Hillel, the Jewish campus organization, by pro-Palestinian protesters. Many had to go without their yarmulkes for fear of being attacked. And so, as I walked from the subway station to the campus at West 114th Street and Broadway, I grew tense, my heart pounding in my chest. It was a brutally hot day, and the suit and fedora weren't helping; sweat covered my brow, ran down my neck; it was a feeling of suffocation, from both within and without.

I looked for kaffiyehs.

Watch out, I thought, for kaffiyehs.

I'm not a neckwear kind of guy, but I recalled watching the protests on the news and wondering where the students got all those kaffiyehs. It seemed like every student was wearing one.

(Business idea: kaffiyeh shops near liberal colleges.)

Wherever they got them, they must have run out, because though I saw hundreds of students, I didn't see a single kaffiyeh. Not on Broadway. Not on 114th. Not on Amsterdam Avenue.

All I saw were stressed-out students hurrying to class. They didn't seem to give a flying fuck about the overheating Orthodox Jew blocking the sidewalk.

I spotted a Jewish student wearing a black felt yarmulke and approached him. I told him that I was visiting the campus, that my son was considering attending next year, but that I had heard it was dangerous.

"Dangerous?" he asked.

"You know," I said. "For Jews."

He scoffed.

"Most of the students *are* Jews," he said.

"So you're not afraid? You don't feel you have to take your yarmulke off?"

"Not at all."

"But your friends," I asked, "they take theirs off, right?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Because they're afraid."

"No," he said. "Because they're not religious. They're away from their parents, partying."

None of this made any sense. I knew what I'd seen, what I'd read.

"What year are you?" I asked.

"Sophomore."

"So you were here last semester," I said. "During the riots. You saw them."

He rolled his eyes.

"It was one night," he said. "And, like, maybe a hundred students. There's ten *thousand* here."

"You mean to tell me," I pressed, "that if we go over to Hillel House right now, nothing's going on?"

"Of course there's something going on," he said. "I'm on my way there now."

For a protest?

"For the weekly Torah lesson," he said. "You should tell your son to come here. Really, it's great."

"I will," I said. "Thank you."

"Where is he now?" he asked.

"UCLA," I said.

"UCLA?" he gasped. "I heard that's *really* bad."

• • •

I decided to leave the gentrified West Harlem bubble of Columbia and head over to Harlem proper because Blacks hate Jews. I was taught that most of my young life and never much believed it, but the recent comments of some Black celebrities—Kanye, Kyrie, Diddy, Cube—were giving me pause.

IN PORTLAND, I WAS EXPECTING A FAR-LEFT, ANTIFA-RAVAGED HELLSCAPE OF ANTISEMITIC PROUD BOYS AND EVEN MORE ANTISEMITIC ANARCHISTS. UNFORTUNATELY, IT WAS STAGGERINGLY BEAUTIFUL.

Hot and sweating, I stopped for a cigarette on the corner of Frederick Douglass Boulevard. I noticed an elderly Black woman sitting on her wheelie bag a few feet away, fanning herself with her straw hat as I had been with my fedora.

"Hot day, huh?" I said.

She turned to me with furious hatred in her eyes.

"Why don't you get the fuck outta here?" she hissed.

Finally, I thought.

I almost laughed out loud at this little old Jew hater, so old, so close to death, and still so hateful. I decided to press her, see how much vitriol I could get her to spew. "Fuck it," I thought, "the bitch is go. I could take her."

"Tough day?" I asked, hoping it had been.

She whipped around to face me, every wrinkle in her face pinching together in a malevolent sneer.

"I quit smoking two weeks ago!" she snapped. "I don't need to be smelling that shit!"

She didn't hate me for being Jewish.

She hated me for being a smoker.

I kinda liked her.

• • •

As I approached St. Nicholas Avenue, a Latino man exiting his brownstone apartment building spotted me coming down the street. He stopped wrestling his e-bike through the doorway and froze, not even trying to hide his stare. The look on his face was one of such utter fury that for a moment I considered crossing the street to avoid him. The closer I walked, the more disgusted his glare, until I was right at the bottom of his front steps. We locked eyes. I really wished my yarmulke had come with Mace.

"Need a hand with that bike?"

I asked.

His entire demeanor changed.

His face softened, his shoulders dropped.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Thank you, thank you. I hate this fucking thing sometimes."

He wasn't angry at me. He was angry at the bike.

I helped him down the stairs, and we ended up speaking for a long while. He had been shot seven times a few years back, he said, just a few blocks away. The doctors told him he'd never walk again, but he proudly told me that he doesn't give up, and now he could ride for almost a mile before his hip gave out. I told him about my bad back. We joked about getting old, and before setting off, he gave me a tight bro hug, knocking my fedora back.

"Good to meet you, brother," he said.

"You too," I said.

As I waited for the light, three Black men stopped beside me. They wore robes, rosaries, and frowns.

I looked at them.

They looked at me.

"I gotta tell you, fellas," I said, "I wish my religion required robes. It's hot as hell in this thing."

"Yeah, well," said the one closest to me, "black attracts heat."

"You can say that," I said, "I can't."

They laughed. The light changed, and as they walked away, he turned, waved, and called out, "*Ma nishma*," a common Hebrew expression meaning "How's it going?" It's actually a greeting, not a farewell.

"*B'seder*," I said.

Hebrew for "All good."

3

PORTLAND

OK, I thought, sure, but that was New York. The left is the new Nazi Party (I read that on *The Free Press*), so I decided to put on my Orthodox garb and go to Portland, a left-wing failed-state hellhole (I read that on *The Free Press* too).

When I first visited Israel in my teens, I was shocked to find it a modern nation with highways and skyscrapers. Because of the Bible, I was expecting camels, sand dunes, and forefathers. I had a similar reaction when I arrived in Portland. Because of the news, I was expecting a far-left, antifa-ravaged postapocalyptic hellscape of antisemitic Proud Boys

and even more antisemitic anarchists. Unfortunately, it was staggeringly beautiful, the people about as friendly as a cynic like me would least expect.

I decided to go to the suburb of Gresham, where a local told me many of the Proud Boys lived, but all I found there was a bagel shop staffed with welcoming staff, one of whom looked at my outfit and let me know that she didn't think the bagels were kosher. The teen couple ahead of me didn't seem to notice my fedora or tzitzit; when I asked if they'd ever had the chocolate chip bagel, they didn't tell me to "drop dead, Jew," they told me they hadn't, but they thought I should give it a try.

"You only live once," the guy said.

"That's true," I said, adjusting my fedora. "Unless you're Jesus."

"Yes," he said. "He can skip the bagel."

"Or maybe he should try it," his girlfriend said, "so he knows not to have one when he comes back."

We laughed.

"She makes a good point," I said.

I was confused. Everything seemed so much simpler on my phone—who hated me, who I should hate, how much hate was increasing. The headline that morning on my Glass of Doom was "People Suck," as it had been every day before and would be every day after.

"I hear there's a lot of riots here," I said to the cab driver, an elderly Asian man with a thick accent. He acknowledged that there had been, after George Floyd was killed, but not since.

"It's a beautiful city," he said.

"It is," I said. "But on the news it's like *Mad Max*."

He didn't mind. It kept Portland a



AS I ENTERED THE GUN RANGE'S OFFICE IN MY ORTHODOX JEW OUTFIT, EVERYONE FROZE. THE WHOLE CONVERTED TRAILER FELL UTTERLY, WORRYINGLY SILENT. A YOKEL IN HIS MID-30S STARED AT ME, LITERALLY SLACK-JAWED, HIS TEETH CROOKED AND YELLOW.

secret, kept people from coming in and ruining it. It was peaceful, he said, safe, and he wanted to keep it that way.

"Even for people like me?" I asked. "Jews?"

"Very safe," he said.

"Even at the university?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Maybe not at the university."

...

The Jew headed down SW Park Avenue, the campus center of Portland State University. He was nervous. He was on guard. A few months earlier, this campus had seen violent student protests against Israel, worse than anything at Columbia or UCLA. Far-left antifa members clashed with police and set their vehicles on fire. Students carried signs that read "Global Intifada" and equated the Star of David with a swastika.

As he walked, students turned to look at him.

They hated him, he could feel it.

A woman—faculty age, the Jew surmised—with a shaved head and a nose ring eyed him up and down as he walked by. Her tote bag read "Free Palestine." He nodded. She nodded back, barely, eyeing the strings of his tzitzit as she did.

"Antisemite," I thought.

Just then a group of three students emerged from the residence hall, loud and boisterous. They spotted me, laughed, making no secret of their disdain. As they passed, one young woman stepped in my way, forcing me to halt. She snapped her fingers in my face, kicked out with her leg, and thrust her hips back and forth in a "fuck you" motion. The others laughed with derision as they walked away.

"Excuse me," I called after them.

They stopped, turned to face me.

I wanted to lash out. I wanted to punch someone in the face; if I had to wear this ridiculous suit and hat, I should at the very least be allowed to punch a dumb fucking college student in the fucking face.

"What?" the young woman asked with an arrogant air.

I stepped toward her.

I wanted to say something about Hitler. I wanted to say something about Hamas. But my experiences thus far were taking a toll on my cynicism, and I wanted to see what would happen if we just talked.

"You guys know where the campus bookstore is?" I asked.

"The bookstore?"

"Yeah," I said. "The bookstore. You know—where they sell books."

The other girl laughed.

"How would she know what a book is? She can barely read."

More laughter.

"It's close," the male student said.

"I'll show you."

I walked with them and was just about to ask the girl why she hated Jews when she turned to me and said, "You look like Michael Jackson."

"I do?"

"Yeah," she said. "With the black suit and hat. I like it. That's why I did the whole dance thing."

"Oh," I said. "I figured."

She fist-bumped me.

"I like it," she said. "I'm gonna dress like M.J. for Halloween."

"Good idea," I said.

"Bookstore's on the corner, just down the road," the guy said. "Can't miss it."

4

NEVADA

"Get a lot of white nationalists out here?" I asked the man loading the Glock.

He smiled his crooked smile and looked at the yarmulke on my head.

"Not gonna lie, brother," he said. "But yeah."

I appreciated his honesty.

"Well," he said, "that's why we gotta get our own guns, you know? Be ready."

"Optimist," I said.

Having struck out in New York and Portland, I decided to find myself some good old-fashioned rural America MAGA inbred redneck homophobic racists, so I went to a shooting range in the middle of the Nevada desert, a dusty drive along dirt roads, tumbleweeds, and trailer homes.

The news on my Glass of Doom was getting worse. In Michigan, a rabbi's home had been invaded by a gunman during Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. In Pittsburgh, someone had attacked Jewish students with a glass bottle. The ADL had new numbers: 10,000 antisemitic incidents since the



October 7 Hamas attacks.

As I entered the range's office in my Orthodox Jew outfit, everyone froze. The whole converted trailer fell utterly, worryingly silent. A yokel in his mid-30s stared at me, literally slack-jawed, his teeth crooked and yellow. I was going to make a joke about why the Grand Wizard was late—Jews, no doubt—but they didn't seem like the joking type.

Also, guns.

I signed the mandatory release forms, and Crooked Smile asked the group if we had any questions.

"Against the assault of laughter," Mark Twain wrote, "nothing can stand."

I hoped he was right.

"Yeah," I said, motioning to Slackjaw. "What's to stop that guy from blowing my Jewish head off?"

You could hear the pin of a grenade drop. Everyone turned to Slackjaw. A very long few seconds passed.

And then Slackjaw laughed.

They all laughed.

"You did sign the part about not being mentally defective, right?" Slackjaw said.

"Just checking," I said. "I hear there's a lot of Jew hatred out there these days."

"Yeah, well," he said with a wave of his hand, "y'can't watch news no more, it'll drive you crazy. Now let's go shoot."

As we made our way to the range, Slackjaw asked me why I had to wear the hat and suit. It occurred to me that I was quite possibly the first actual Jew he had ever met.

"God," I said. "He wants us to sweat."

"Well, he sent you to the right place..."

One of the instructors told me he was originally from western New York, but couldn't take the winters anymore; it caused tension with his wife, as her parents live in Minneapolis and he refuses to go during the winter.

"Have you considered just shooting her?" I asked.

"More'n once," he laughed.

A couple visiting from Phoenix were there to shoot as well. I asked if they owned any guns at home.

"No way," the wife said with a heavy southern accent. "He comes here, gets his jollies, and we go home."

"Good plan," I said. "I'm here to get ready for Hamas."

"I think that's more of a grenade thing," said Slackjaw.

For the next hour, we laughed, talked, even paid for one another when our ammo ran out. At the end of the session, I asked to try the AR-15.

"Why?" Slackjaw asked.

"So I know what the guy shooting up my synagogue is dealing with."

When I left, Slackjaw gave me a bro hug. The cynic in me said it was just because I was a paying customer, but after an hour talking and laughing with each other, it felt genuine.

"Good to meet you, man," he said. "Bring the rest of your synagogue next time, we'll get y'all ready."

I know, I know—it's not exactly peace in our time. But it isn't hate.

5 LOS ANGELES

"How did it go?" my sons asked when I returned home. "Amazing," I said.

They aren't used to optimism from me.

Don DeLillo, in his 1985 novel of the same name, laments the "white noise" of modern life—the constant hum of traffic, television, and commercials that fogs our minds. But that was 40 years ago. Today it seems to me we are beset by "black noise"—by a constant hum of rage, fear, and hate that divides us, terrifies us, made worse by technology that encourages us to be alone. The rectangular glass in my pocket tells me to be afraid. It tells me I'm hated, and it tells me to hate. My experiences suggest otherwise, but I still don't know who to believe. That's part of the black noise; in the face of not knowing, we suspect.

This, though, is what I know for certain:

I know that more than 1,200 Jews were murdered on October 7. I know that synagogues get shot up and Jews get murdered. I know that X is filled with antisemitism, bigotry, racism, and homophobia, and I know that universities reward conformity.

I also know this:

The guy who attacked Jewish students at the University of Pittsburgh with glass bottles? Turns out he attacks loads of people with glass bottles, not just Jews.

IN THIS TIME OF HATE, THE PEOPLE I MET DIDN'T HATE ME. SIMPLY SAYING "HELLO" THESE DAYS IS AN ACT OF REVOLUTION.

The Michigan rabbi attacked in his home on Rosh Hashanah? It's only at the very end of the article I read that they quote the investigator: "It seems the motive was to take things."

The Stars of David spray-painted on Paris buildings? French authorities have connected it to a Russian plot to sow discord and hate in the West.

None of these epilogues were reported as breathlessly as the original stories were.

As for the ADL's report of 10,000 antisemitic incidents last year? What they didn't report is that they changed their definition of antisemitism to include anything critical of Israel or anything pro-Palestinian.

Kinda explains the jump.

And I know this, too:

In this time of hate, the people I met didn't hate me. Simply saying "hello" these days is an act of revolution. If you're a Jew, I know what you're thinking, because I thought it as well:

Jews in Germany put their heads in the sand too.

Or:

They're nice to your face, but behind your back they hate you.

You're probably right. I'm probably a schmuck. Where there's smoke, there's fire. But how much is fire and how much is smoke?

"The propagandist's purpose," wrote Aldous Huxley, "is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human."

When my rabbis weren't telling me I was hated, they told me the story of a schmuck named Abraham, who asked God to spare Sodom if he found 10 good people. That, he said, would be redemption enough.

I found a few dozen in America, 2024.

It's a start. ♫



AMONG THE EDGE LORDS

At Hereticon, an ultra-exclusive gathering of tech titans and their dark enlightenment hangers-on, the future looks pretty great—as long as we ditch democracy. **By Daniel Pinchbeck**

“THIS IS JUST LIKE THE HUNGER GAMES!” a young woman venture capitalist in a purple wig and silver sci-fi bodysuit exclaimed, standing on the balcony overlooking the Apocalypse Ball. Held over Halloween weekend at the Faena Forum, an exhibition and event space in Miami Beach designed in minimal modernist fashion by Rem Koolhaas, the doomsday shindig resembled a very rich, strangely somber Burning Man party, with the familiar assortment of costumed revelers, half-naked dancers, and carnivalesque stilt walkers. It featured dim sum, filet mignon, chocolate bonbons, and an unlimited open bar.

One story I heard from that night, perhaps apocryphal or exaggerated or misinterpreted: A young engineer in the biotech space approached Thiel with a proposition. He could attempt to clone the legendary physicist John von Neumann from dried saliva he left on the back of a postage stamp. Impressed, Thiel allegedly invested on the spot.

Those in attendance had been commanded to dress for the imminent end of the world. One contingent came as their favorite Roman emperors, marking the approaching fall of the republic and the thrilling return to monarchy. Others wore white tie and tails, or ceremonial robes. Luridly canceled Hollywood stars, libertarian YouTube influencers, and infamous white-collar criminals boozed and canoodled. Photocopies of the Unabomber Manifesto were scattered around, presumably ironically.

The event was the culmination of Hereticon, an annual three-day conference for “thoughtcrime,” put on by Thiel’s venture capital firm, the Founders Fund. The brash spirit of the legendary \$80 billion investor who believes in free markets, “sovereign individuals,” and tech monopolies hovered over the event. Hereticon brings together tech entrepreneurs, investors, maverick scientists, UFO enthusiasts, effective altruists, and AI doomers and AI accelerationists for a deluxe gabfest, with talks, panels, performances, and the lavish Apocalypse Ball.

Hereticon occurred just a week before Election Day. I was not in a happy frame of mind. Current events were making it difficult for me to maintain my usual state of non-attached bonhomie and underlying optimism. It was difficult to ignore the brutal omens of approaching neofascism, or to suppress my growing anxiety for the future of America in the epoch of surveillance capitalism and hypermanipulative artificial intelligence. Even if Donald Trump lost, it was hard to muster enthusiasm for the dreary status quo—preserving alternative.

Onstage a month earlier, I interviewed Guy McPherson, a doomer climate scientist.

McPherson believes the great human die-off will start in the next five years, as rivers dry up, food runs out, Category 5 superstorms become annual rites of passage, and mass climate migration triggers nuclear wars. When I got the surprise invite to attend Hereticon—probably because of my past books on psychedelics and prophecy—I felt there was nothing left to lose. The neoliberal transhumanists gathering might be my ideological nemeses, but at least they felt enthusiasm for this future we were caroming toward.

Hereticon bills itself as a convention for radical, dangerous thought. “Most new ideas are wrong, or useless. Some are even dangerous. But from science and technology to business and faith, progress is a history of persecuted weirdos,” the organizers note on their website. The event covers topics such as “genetic modification, natalism, parapsychology, artificial consciousness, defense, pharmacology, virology, sex, God.”

There were a lot of big ideas tossed around—these people think in moonshots (interstellar travel and nanobots), not incremental changes (Inflation Reduction Acts and antitrust legislation). There was no problem that couldn’t be solved through some combination of crypto, exponential tech, and owning the libs. There was

marketing officer of the Founders Fund.

The event operates under “Chatham House rules,” meaning attendees are not supposed to divulge who was there (without their express permission) or who said what. So, I can’t really tell you everything I saw and heard. It may, however, be the case that one of Elon Musk’s numerous baby mamas played a hyperactive DJ set that wove in quotes from the Machiavellian manifesto *The 48 Laws of Power*. It might be the case that one of the world’s wealthiest men, a financial backer of the new regime, gave a talk equating liberal humanism and its social programs to help the poor with the Antichrist. It is possible that a former Trump advisor advocated for a new American imperialism, potentially involving the annexation of Greenland and other neighboring landmasses. It could be



THE FUTURE FOR THE HERETICON CREW WASN’T JUST BRIGHT. IT WAS FEVERISHLY INCANDESCENT. ALL WE HAD TO DO WAS LET GO OF A FEW PRECONCEPTIONS AND SELL OUR SOULS TO THE BLOCKCHAIN.

nothing to worry about—unless you made the mistake of listening to the infamous theorist Roko, who held court one afternoon on how to prepare for the coming AI dictatorship. Roko gained notoriety for his “basilisk” thought experiment, in which he proposed that a future superintelligent AI might bring back from the dead and infinitely torture anyone who knew about its potential but tried to thwart its development. Roko’s thought experiment was considered so dangerous to express that it was banned from certain free-speech, techno-utopian forums.

Never mind: The future for the Hereticon crew wasn’t just bright. It was feverishly incandescent. All we had to do was let go of a few preconceptions and sell our souls to the blockchain.

Hereticon was put together by longtime Thiel acolyte Michael Solana, recently dubbed “The Most Opinionated Man in America” by *The Atlantic*. Solana is the chief

that there was a talk on why parents should hit their kids, another on why we need a return to the “tradwife,” and yet another on why, by dint of biology, women tend to be manipulative and evil. It might also be true that the open bar remained consummately well-stocked through the long days and nights.

I suppose I can mention that Martin Shkreli, notorious for pumping the price on a lifesaving antiparasitic drug from \$13.50 to \$750 per pill, was in attendance, since he mentioned it on X. Shkreli was recently released from jail for looting a drug company he founded, Retrophin, of \$11 million to pay back investors in two of his failed hedge funds. At Hereticon, he was given a hero’s welcome by the largely male conveners.

There were a few other people who made their attendance public, all of whom are worth noting here. The black-bearded Canadian engineer Guillaume Verdon, for instance, is the founder of stealth AI startup Extropic and a leader of the “e/acc” (effective

accelerationist) movement via his X persona, @basedbeffjezos. Effective accelerationists believe we should push the pedal to the metal when it comes to developing hyperfuturist technologies, from life extension to artificial superintelligence to interstellar transport, lab-grown food, and cryogenics. According to *Forbes*, Verdon believes “that ‘institutions have decayed beyond the point of salvaging’ and that the media is a ‘vector for cybernetic control of culture’”: points of near-universal agreement among Hereticon-veners.

One night in a sumptuous penthouse overlooking moonlit Miami Beach, after a talk on bringing the neoreactionary (sometimes abbreviated NRx) zeitgeist into the contemporary art world, I found myself chatting with Aella, a 32-year-old writer and self-proclaimed neurodiverse celebrity escort who was wearing a silk kimono draped over a black blouse, about the “rape orgies” she organizes to help rich alpha males reclaim their primal nature. “We’re not being so curious about the way sexuality actually works,” she said.

An X, YouTube, and former OnlyFans star with an appealing nerdiness, Aella has become an icon of tech libertarians. She was recently interviewed by a googly-eyed Lex Fridman about topics like her childhood (she was homeschooled by Christian fundamentalists in Idaho before running away as a teenager), her sex work, and her extensive surveys on kink and perversion, with half a million respondents and counting.

She recalled her mingled curiosity and shame about sex as a kid: “When I was growing up, I would, like, masturbate and Google ‘oh, is it OK for women to masturbate?’” This eventually led to her data-driven approach to eroticism. “What makes us think that if men watch a lot of extreme porn—really bad content—they go out and do those things in real life?” she asked. “People have a lot of identity wrapped up in their ideas around sexuality. They find it too triggering to explore it.”

...

Humanity’s plausible near-term extinction was a leitmotif of Hereticon, as was its capacity to build fortunes based on the same technologies that threaten to eliminate us. The slogan for the event is “Be Not Afraid!” The gist of Hereticon seems to be that if you’re worried about the future of humanity, you’re looking at things wrong. Or, as its website says, “Afraid of a world where genetically modified superhumans discriminate against the average guy? Consider for a moment you just used the word ‘superhuman,’ and believed designing supermen was possible.”

Somehow this approach doesn't make me feel better. But I will grant that there were a lot of ambitious futurists at the event, ready to rock. I met a secretive, giggling tech entrepreneur whose unlisted company "grows" human bodies without brains for various nebulous purposes, which he didn't care to divulge. (Organ harvesting? The ultimate sex toys?) Another entrepreneurial engineer is ready to pour gigatons of sulfur particles into the atmosphere to mitigate global warming, giving the sky a permanent dull orange cast while cooling the climate. Yet another scientist plans to dump massive amounts of hematite into the oceans to stimulate rapid seaweed growth. I met a proselytizer for fossil fuels who argued that anyone who is "pro-freedom" knows we need to produce much more of them, as a warming world will be better for all. Among the Hereticon hoi polloi, there was much excitement about Próspera, a "startup city" in Honduras with the goal of "building the future of human governance: privately run and for-profit," as the *New York Times* put it. (The *Times* also noted that critics call Próspera "a neocolonial state within a state, or an example of corporate monarchy, where yacht-owning C.E.O.s exploit land and labor in a poor country.")

But the celebratory vibe was, I found, strangely muted and joyless. When I asked the neoreactionary ideologue Curtis Yarvin about this, he used the analogy of Plato's cave to describe the red-pilled elitists: "When you finally get out of the cave, when you first emerge onto the surface and see the sun, it can be a bit depressing. The surface is too much reality, in a way."

Perhaps there was a subliminal awareness that this movement of thinkers, builders, and financiers that once saw itself as opposed to the mainstream liberal establishment was now on the verge of a takeover. Perhaps there was something implicitly sobering about this prospect. Thiel once noted: "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." He apparently withdrew from funding Trump's 2024 campaign because of Trump's stance on LGBTQ and abortion rights, yet he hovers in the background and is considered by many to be a mastermind behind the scenes. Thiel funded the Silicon Valley career of JD Vance and was his main backer for Senate in 2020, and he was a major donor to Trump in 2016. He was the central figure in the merging of Silicon Valley with Trumpism, which is now eerily complete.

One of the principal NRx manifestos is Nick Land's *Dark Enlightenment*. Land writes: "For the hardcore neo-reactionaries, democracy is not merely doomed, it is doom

itself. Fleeing it approaches an ultimate imperative." Perhaps it is hard for people with an Ayn Randian fixation on power and control to cut loose.

"Somebody said we are building a new 'counterelite,'" an editor of a well-funded glossy startup journal said at the penthouse panel about transforming the cultural world to mesh with NRx ideology. "No! We are building the new elite!" The panelists objected to the way "creatively impotent and ideologically captured" liberals control the media and Hollywood, forcing screenwriters to get the LGBTQ media watchdog GLAAD to approve their scripts. With alpha male gusto, they vowed to take it all back.

No doubt: A well-funded intellectual movement has taken off, if not in a direction I might have hoped. This includes new NRx-friendly magazines and journals such as *Man's World*—possibly the neoreactionary's answer to *Playboy*—which celebrates New Right icons like Bronze Age Pervert and Raw Egg Nationalist. Another journal is *Palladium*, where articles like "What Botswana Can Teach Us About Political Stability" describe how to make a hereditary monarchy appear to be a democracy without ceding power.

I find it bizarre that ultrawealthy people who have benefited so lavishly from the liberal nation-state and government largesse seem so intent on demolishing all of the protections and legacy institutions that enabled them to amass such fantastic fortunes—but hey, that's just me. According to author Jonathan Taplin, the book that shaped Thiel's political ideas above all else was *The Sovereign Individual*, by U.S. investor James Dale Davidson and U.K. House of Lords member William Rees-Mogg. Quoting the book, Taplin writes that it "depicts the collapse of the nation-state as an exciting possibility for elites, who, freed of regulation, would interact 'on terms that echo the relation among the gods in Greek myth.' Private militias would protect the oligarchs, as the rest of humanity descended into destitution and random violence." Seems like a strange idea of a good time.

I tried to gain some elucidation of this ideology from Thiel's house philosopher, with mixed results. Curtis Yarvin, who blogs under the name Mencius Moldbug, envisions a post-democratic society where the USA is run like a technology corporation with a CEO-dictator, given ultimate power, at the helm. Recently, *The New Republic* cited Yarvin in "Where J.D. Vance Gets His Weird, Terrifying Techno-Authoritarian Ideas," noting that this "obscure software designer" jokes about turning the underclass

into biodiesel. Yarvin "openly promotes dictatorships as superior to democracies and views nations like the United States as outdated software systems." In person, Yarvin, 51, seemed a mild-mannered, avuncular tech geek in a button-down and jeans—the kind of troll who delights in long debates on obscure internet forums.

Yarvin is hardly a subtle thinker. But he states his ideas with great conviction. "I find there is a vast cruelty in the false compassion of liberals," Yarvin told me. "It disturbs me endlessly that they are unable to see that the main function of this false emotion is to give them unlimited license for hatred and cruelty in the name of good."

Using a labyrinthine, murky style of argument peppered with references to relatively obscure poets, novelists, and political thinkers (Thomas Carlyle, Fustel de Coulanges, Joseph de Maistre), Yarvin sought to convince me that Kamala Harris's ideology derives from Peoples Temple cult leader Jim Jones, while Barack Obama's key intellectual influence was the Weather Underground—the far-left terrorists who accidentally blew up their West Village brownstone in 1970. The word "progressive" is, for Yarvin, essentially synonymous with "communist." Above all, he believes our "system of governance" is "an enormously awful thing" that needs to be obliterated.

Speaking with Yarvin, I eventually started to vague out. Despite his onslaught of verbiage and endless references, I still believe humanity's revolution against monarchy and despotism was a fantastic development—the hallmark of our modern era. I like progressive taxation (a 90 percent tax on those earning above \$200,000 was what we had in the 1950s, when the American system was the envy of the world) and the Great Society reforms and don't want to live in even more of a total surveillance dystopia than we already have. I hope we find the will to rebel against our new tech overlords before it's too late.

As I reflected on it later, what most struck me about Hereticon was its joyless, almost dour undertone. Both Yarvin and Thiel like to cite *Lord of the Rings*, siding provocatively with the villains. In 2011 Thiel told *Details*: "Gandalf's the crazy person who wants to start a war. Mordor is this technological civilization based on reason and science. Outside of Mordor, it's all sort of mystical and environmental and nothing works." Rooting for Mordor may be fun as an oppositional stance, but deep down, nobody wants to party there. Perhaps the real question for our new tech rulers is: When you have won it all, what then? 🍷

American Flag Football League ace Darrell Doucette at a game in Kennesaw, Georgia. Opposite: His next rival, Kansas City Chiefs QB Patrick Mahomes.



THE WORLD'S GREATEST FLAG FOOTBALL PLAYER JUST WANTS TO GET PAID

Quarterback **DARRELL DOUCETTE** will lead **FLAG FOOTBALL** into the **2028 OLYMPIC GAMES** in Los Angeles—if **PATRICK MAHOMES** doesn't take his job. **BY JACK TIEN-DANA**

DARRELL DOUCETTE, the best flag football quarterback in the history of flags and football, is stuck. Someone has parked their car across the entrance to his driveway and he can't get out. We'd planned to meet at Neyow's Creole Café in the Mid-City neighborhood of New Orleans at 2 p.m.; now it's 2:41 and he's still boxed in. All the Ubers are far away, inching through the torpor of a rainy pre-Christmas Tuesday afternoon.

When Doucette arrives 20 minutes later, he's at the midpoint of clammy and wet, his long cornrows matted to his neck. He couldn't wait any longer, he explains, so he ran up and down his block, knocking on every neighbor's door until he finally found the owner of the offending car.

The symbolism here—overlooked hometown hero labors to overcome an obstacle separating him from the acclaim he deserves—isn't exactly subtle. Still, it's fitting that the 35-year-old Doucette, the son of a New Orleans police detective, doesn't brook vagary or mystery. In person, the most striking thing about the five-foot-seven, 140-pound Doucette is his vibe: It's more distilled and concentrated than the average person's. He doesn't fidget or yammer. When asked a question, he actually answers.



On his future: "I've got three, four years left in me. I want to play in the Olympics—that's the one thing left for me in the flag football world that I want to accomplish."

On the stigma that surrounds flag football: "People look down on us because they think we're nothing but NFL rejects."

On what I should order: "The gumbo. You're in New Orleans—you gotta get the gumbo." He also gets the gumbo.

On the Olympics? Don't get him started. In an interview with *The Guardian* in August, Doucette infamously said it was "disrespectful" for NFL stars like Jalen Hurts

and Joe Burrow to "automatically assume" they'd be able to steal his spot as the starting quarterback on the U.S. National Team when flag football makes its Olympic debut in 2028. "We just don't think they're going to be able to walk on the field and make the Olympic team because of the name, right?" he said. "They still have to go out there and compete."

"At the end of the day," he then proceeded to tell TMZ Sports, "I feel like I'm better than Patrick Mahomes because of my IQ of the game."

Immediately, Doucette became the first flag football player to go viral. Lost in all the social media brouhaha, though, is the fact that he was—and is—correct. Just as there's no guarantee that Roger Federer would be good at ping-pong or that Joey Chestnut would have a knack for Hungry Hungry Hippos, flag football requires a skill set that the typical NFL player has never bothered to acquire. Doucette says he isn't motivated by personal pride or some grudge against Mahomes (whom he greatly admires); he simply felt a duty to speak up.

"Other flag football players were asking me to say something about the way that [NFL players] were talking about the Olympics," he tells me. "I feel like when I speak out, people listen. It's like LeBron James—whenever he speaks within the NBA, he becomes their voice. I kind of view myself the same way [in terms of flag football]. I've accomplished so much that people are gonna listen, whether they think I'm right or wrong."

The two types of football are so different, Doucette has made it without really having any formal gridiron experience. He quit his high school team after his freshman season so he could focus on track and bowling (he won a state championship in the latter); he didn't take flag football seriously until he signed up for a coed intramural league as a student at Xavier University of Louisiana. After a few classmates invited him to compete in a regional tournament in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Doucette (or Housh, as his friends call him, due to his resemblance to former NFL wide receiver T.J. Houshmandzadeh) was hooked.

"At first, I was like, 'What?' when I heard about the tournament, because I thought flag football was just, like, a kids' thing in New Orleans," Doucette says. "When we got to the tournament and I saw how many people were there and how passionate they were, I really started to fall in love with it."

By the time he graduated in 2012, he'd established himself as one of the top players in the country. Working at the New Orleans airport, he lived a double life: By day, he was Darrell, the Delta ramp agent; by night, the Housh was loose. Darrell prepared planes for



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takeoff; Housh focused on touchdowns. That year, Doucette won his first national title, kicking off a nearly decade-long reign of terror. He and his legendary squad, Fighting Cancer, wouldn't lose another competitive game until 2021.

Most notably, in 2018 they won the biggest game in flag football history, a 26–6 smackdown against a team of former NFL Pro Bowlers on national television, to win \$1 million in the first-ever American Flag Football League Ultimate Final.

“Fighting Cancer might’ve literally gone 1,000-and-1 together,” says Jeff Lewis, a Wall Street financier and founder of the AFFL. “They were like the Harlem Globetrotters, except they were playing versions of the Washington Generals who desperately wanted to beat them.”

Although Doucette’s movements are deliberate and economical off the field, his game has an endearingly ramshackle quality. While NFL QBs obsess over imperceptible

“AT THE END OF THE DAY,” DOUCETTE TOLD TMZ SPORTS, “I FEEL LIKE I’M BETTER THAN PATRICK MAHOMES BECAUSE OF MY IQ OF THE GAME.”

gradations in stride length and the ratio of their hip-to-shoulder separation, Doucette more or less lets it rip, rearing back to chuck the ball like Popeye winding up to throw a punch. He draws up plays on the fly and doesn’t throw a reliably tight spiral.

When he escapes the pocket, he subtly Hula-Hoops his hips, causing the flags to jounce out of the defense’s reach. Since pro-level flag football is still in its infancy, Doucette and his teammates aren’t just dominating the sport, they’re also shaping its physical vocabulary. With the ball in his hands, he has as much in common with a ribbon-twirling rhythmic gymnast as he does with Derrick Henry.

But Doucette is older now—in his own words, he’s slow, at least relative to the younger version of himself, who he says ran the 40-yard dash in the 4.3-second range. He may well turn out to be the most transformational player in flag football history, but it’s unclear how much he’ll share in whatever spoils there are to be had. The AFFL, which held its first exhibition game in 2017, plans to start a pro league later this year. When Lewis talks about his goals for the

league, he envisions packed stadiums and innovative broadcasting technology. When Doucette shares his hopes for the future, he imagines a world where his wants aren’t in conflict with his needs, one where flag football is life—and also his livelihood.

“Even though I love it,” Doucette says, “I can’t let flag football get me behind on my bills. I still have responsibilities. If we were able to make this our job, the quality of the league and the players in it would be even better than they are today, because you’d be able to invest in yourself and your craft. We need to work, but when you get home, it’s late and you’re tired. When do we have time to train?”

For Doucette, the necessity of a day job prevents him from reaching his full potential; to Lewis, this average Joe aspect is central to the sport’s appeal.

“Whether it’s *American Ninja Warrior* or *American Idol*,” Lewis says, “if you look at the most popular TV events over the last couple of decades, it’s all the same story: It’s people who are ordinary with extraordinary gifts and they’re not appreciated, so when they get the opportunity, it’s so affirming for all of us. And that’s why everybody just laps it up.”

Affirmations notwithstanding, in the wake of the AFFL’s 11th-hour decision last spring to delay its inaugural season from 2024 to 2025—and with the launch date for this year’s season still uncertain—there’s no real framework for flag football to support its players.

“Flag football is something we all do because it’s fun,” Doucette says. “You’re not thinking about your job or your bills or whatever you’re going through at home. But the difference [between us and other pro athletes] is that they’re getting paid for their fun, while we’re paying for ours.”

As we walk out of Neyow’s, it’s clear that most everyone in the restaurant knows Doucette. It’s even clearer that everyone who knows him likes him.

“If I walked down the streets of New Orleans with Drew Brees on one side and Housh on other,” Lewis says, “I’m not sure who would get recognized more.”

Doucette is puzzled when he hears I’m interested in taking a streetcar back to my hotel. (“You know it’s just like a bus, right? You want to wait for the bus? In the rain?”) Instead, he offers to drive me. When he drops me off, it turns out that the bellhop, naturally, is a friend.

“How do you know Housh?” I ask the bellhop.

“We used to play flag football together,” he answers.

“Are you still teammates?”

“Nah. Housh is big time now.” 🙌

DARRELL DOUCETTE’S Olympic Dream Team



WITH FLAG FOOTBALL slated to make its Olympic debut in 2028, NFL stars like Joe Burrow, Patrick Mahomes, Jalen Hurts, and Tyreek Hill are already jockeying for inclusion. Putting the U.S. roster together is the fantasy draft of your fantasies: 97 percent of NFL players are American; it would be harder to build a team that doesn’t win the gold medal. Here is the best hypothetical five-man flag football team—according to Darrell Doucette, the best actual flag football player.

QUARTERBACK

▲ Lamar Jackson

Although Mahomes is on pace to become the greatest quarterback in NFL history, Jackson has the right mix of accuracy, shiftiness, and speed to be a terror in flag football. Plus, Doucette notes, he’s the rare NFLer with real flag football experience, having played it growing up in Florida.

WIDE RECEIVERS

Ja’Marr Chase,
Justin Jefferson and Tyreek Hill

The NFL is overflowing with talented receivers, but Chase, Jefferson, and Hill are the elite of the elite in Doucette’s eyes. If complex physical NFL defenses can’t contain the trio, Chase, Jefferson, and Hill would do unspeakable damage against Austrian and Panamanian ham-and-egggers who can’t press or double-team them.

CENTER

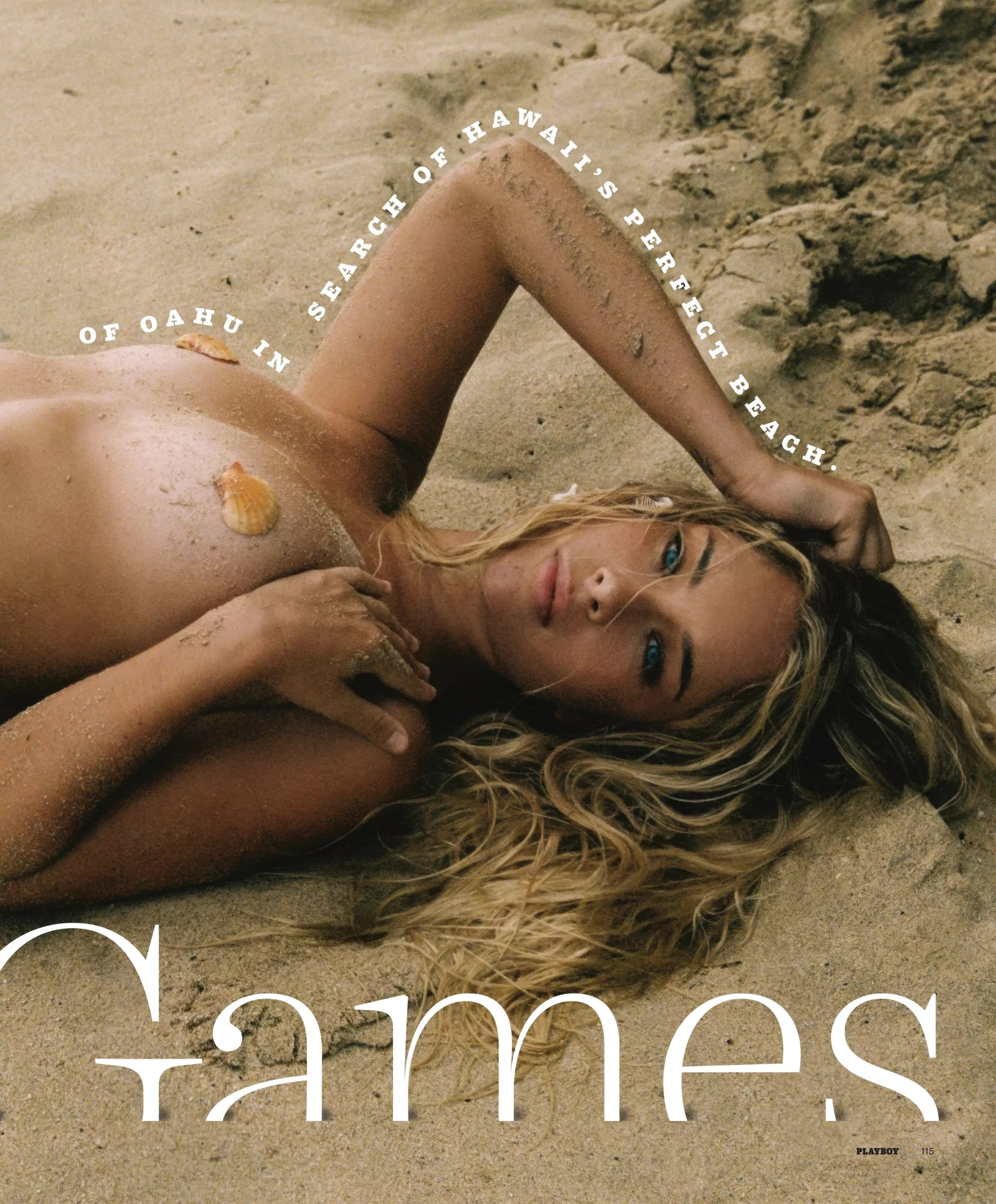
Alvin Kamara

The center in flag football is essentially a slot receiver, free to run routes after snapping the ball. Kamara, one of the best pass-catching running backs in the NFL, is a natural fit, especially because he has the chops as a pass blocker to hold his own against a blitz if needed. “You know I need a Saint,” Doucette says, “so let’s put my boy in there.” —J.T.



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names







Yara Khmidan

“

31
LOS ANGELES

I was born in Odesa, Ukraine, and I'm part Syrian and part Ukrainian. I moved to the U.S. a decade ago to pursue modeling and acting, and found a home in California. I love what I do so much that it's difficult to tell the difference between work and play. When I'm not on a shoot, I try to learn something new, like a cooking recipe, fencing with a foil, or going back to the Strasberg acting school for a semester. I'm a '90s movie fanatic, and my all-time favorite is True Romance. My musical taste is the opposite: I listen to everything. When you're on set, you're around so many styles it makes your ears chameleonlike. To find a neutral base, I like to listen to different sound waves and frequencies. It's very therapeutic. And I can do it alone in bed.”











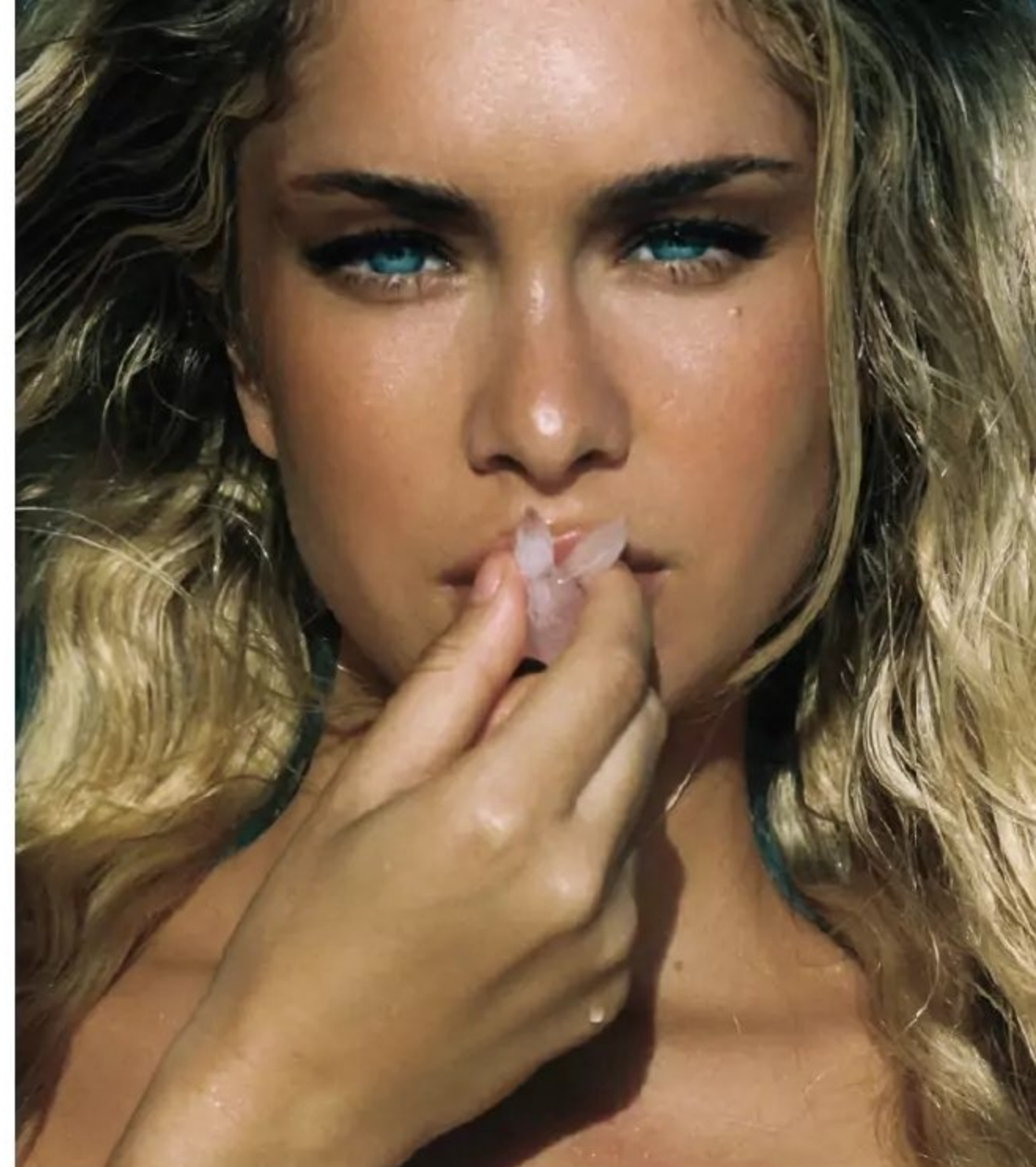


Carmen Pratt

“

25
HONOLULU

My friends call me Carm. I'm a sustainability activist, and protecting the Earth is my mission. I work really hard to help people connect to the natural world. It's relatively easy to pull that off where I live in beautiful Hawaii, where I moved after growing up in Ventura County, California. Surfing, hiking, and diving keep me fit—I think nature is the best gym. A cheeky fact about me? When I'm alone in the forest, or on the beach, or diving, I like to be naked. You haven't lived life til you've been naked swimming under a waterfall. Most days, you'll find me at the beach with a flower in my hair, or making healthy food with my friends. My go-to is locally sourced steak and eggs with avocado from my garden.”







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